

# “Words”

James 3:1-12

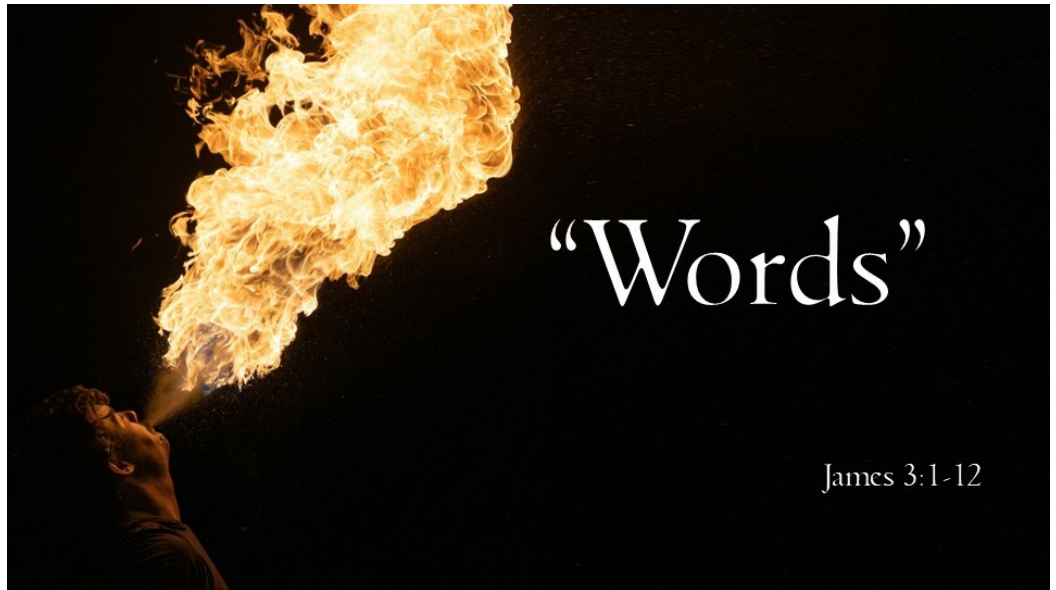
by Pastor Tim Dodson  
at Believers City Church  
in Menomonie, Wis  
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*1 My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.*

*2 For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he [is] a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.*

*3 Indeed, we put bits in horses’*

*mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. 4 Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. 5 Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! 6 And the tongue [is] a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. 7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. 8 But no man can tame the tongue. [It is] an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. 10 Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. 11 Does a spring send forth fresh [water] and bitter from the same opening? 12 Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.*



The essential driving point of the book of James is that if a person claims to have faith, there will be some evidence of it. Real, concrete, and quantifiable evidence. One such evidence is one’s mouth... one’s “words.” Genuine faith indeed produces good works, but it also produces a controlled tongue.

It seems that within the greater Christian community, folks readily acknowledge as sin the committing of the gross sins of murder, adultery, stealing, drunkenness, etc., but at the same time we have “graduated” other “lite” sins to life on the fringes of the faith. Stuff like lying, lust, gluttony, coveting, and gossip. James seems to be adept at dragging these fringe issues back into the mainstream. He speaks of this issue of the tongue, ...this “little” issue...as an “unruly evil, full of deadly poison.” As a “small spark that sets a forest on fire.” So no matter what your opinion is, no matter how we might grade certain sins, James is certainly serious about this one.

I think any life-engaging activity will clear up any ambiguity you might have on this issue pretty quickly. Certainly, I have come to a personal clarity concerning this subject while serving as a pastor. The amount of trouble people’s tongues have gotten themselves into! Not to mention the level of shame it brings upon the Kingdom of God! I have on one side seen the ramifications of simple gossip and loose talk, as well as having been on the receiving end of some profanity that would make sailors blush, and everything in between - all from declared ‘believers.’ This is especially true in a world where we have a plethora of social media on which to snipe at each other anonymously from a distance like unmanned drone attacks.

Through the years, the things I have heard come out of the mouths of those who call themselves God’s kids is beyond shocking, it’s astonishing. From flat-out inventions and fables delivered purely to hurt and defame, to f-bomb laced tirades of anger that nearly generated restraining orders. Often such was delivered from people whom Psalms 55 speaks of as “not an enemy who taunts me — I could bear that. It is not my foes who so arrogantly insult me — I could have hidden from them.” Rather “...my equal, my companion and close friend. What good fellowship we once enjoyed as we walked together to the house of God.”

I have often wondered from where we get our justification for such actions. I have come to believe it is because some folks see themselves as a special case...warranted in their special situation, justified because they have a “really good reason.” “They deserve it,” ...“I’m just paying them back,” ...“they started it,” etc. But the reality is that we are throwing people “under the bus” because we are angry, jealous, or some other human fleshly trait of the old man who we claim is dead. The practice is, of course, always spoken of

as ungodly until **we** are the ones doing it! Then we have all sorts of reasons why we have special dispensation to be judge, jury, and executioner.

The fact is, our mouths have caused incredible and unconscionable damage to the faith and integrity of Christianity. I mean, if the world sees such un-christian behavior from those who claim Christ, why would they have any interest? The world is often more courteous and aware in this area than some who claim a standing with God. It seems that these folks are unaware that their hatred disqualifies them as children of God. 1 John 2:9 says *“Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness.”* 1 John 3:14-15 tells us further that *“We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.”* Proverbs 6:16-19 starkly tells us...*There are six things the LORD hates — no, seven things he detests: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that kill the innocent, a heart that plots evil, feet that race to do wrong, a false witness who pours out lies, a person who sows discord in a family.*

In case you are feeling attacked in this matter, please note that James started in on this issue aiming at me before he came looking for you! Pastors are held both by God and man to a high standard, and rightfully so. We are supposed to be setting the example! Indeed we are, one way or another. Either a good example or a bad one! The Amplified Bible renders verse one as, *“Not many of you should become teachers, my brethren, for you know that we teachers will be judged by a higher standard and with greater severity than other people.”*

Ouch!

Because of a pastor/teacher's influence upon those he shepherds, there is naturally a higher responsibility and accountability. If you remember in the gospel accounts, Jesus was seriously hard on the religious leaders of His day because they were supposed to be the examples. But so often, *both then and now*, we have leaders operating instead out of self-interest and pride. Therefore they fail, ...and they failed then too, ...to practice in their own lives what they taught to others. Jesus never had a lot of patience for religious hypocrites, and we read several instances in the gospels of Him “kickin’ butt and takin’ names” with those guys! So the warning is given by James: be careful before you step up and grab yourself a pulpit, because there is a definite price to be paid for that privilege!

A lot of folks today see the position of pastor or teacher as a very appealing role because of the ability to affect the lives of others or perhaps simply because they think it's a path to power. Seldom do those same folks take into account the incredible responsibility and accountability before God that comes with the position. Not to mention the fact that you are now everyone's favorite target for abuse.

Often today we see teachers who soften the impact of the Word, or go so far as to even distort its truth in order to gain popularity in the world and before the church. James makes it clear, along with a plethora of other biblical passages and writers, that pastors and Scripture teachers will be held “feet to the fire” for such a knowing slight. 2 Timothy 4:2-3 is one. Calling a young pastor then and every pastor since, Paul says, *“I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His Kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.”*

Few of us cannot relate to this battle with our mouths. Even James can identify personally as we notice he uses the word “we” in verse two: *“we all stumble in many things.”* But that cannot serve as an excuse. None of us get a “bye” on certain directives because they are hard, and none of us get to claim, *“Well, that's just the way I am.”* Certainly we will never walk in the perfection Jesus did, but the man who controls his tongue is said to be a “perfect man,” which essentially means the guy is mature; he is complete and **whole**. We could approach this issue seeing the writing on the wall and thus surrender before we even get out of the gate. Or we could suck it up and see it as important to King and Kingdom and grow in this area. I say **grow** because, while I am absolutely not excusing anything or anyone, I am personally aware that this is not a switch to flip, but a race to run.

Our passage says that the individual who is able to control the tongue is able to control the whole body. What comes out of our mouths is reflective of what's inside our hearts and minds. If a person is able to get a handle on his or her mouth, generally he is far closer to having the rest of his life under control. Further, it seems that what actually comes out of the mouth is just the “tip of the iceberg.” Meaning that if garbage spews forth, then it's leaking out of the landfill inside of you. Jesus said in Matt 12:36, *“I tell you, on the day of judgment, people will give account for every careless word they speak.”*

Verse six of our text reads, *“...the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.”* We receive the meaning of the verse as applied to our individual lives and bodies, but it has a deeper meaning too. With regard to the church, *Christ's body*, we see the impact of this on the

members of this body also. The passage says it defiles us as a greater body, a church body. That's why, when some folks move on, it can often be a "blessed subtraction."

We have often heard the phrase "slip of the tongue." In light of this passage, we know that such is really a slip of the heart. Because the heart, like the mouth, is more than just destructive, *it is deceptive*. Controlling our mouths will only come through constant recognition of its potential danger. We have to walk in humble discipline and daily seek the power of the Holy Spirit, so that we can operate in God's Kingdom without being a "bull in a china shop." The Bible tells us to be filled with the Spirit, and the original language literally means to be constantly or repeatedly filled and controlled. Throughout Scripture we are warned on this matter! We must seek to achieve the gift of "shut up in the Spirit."

*"He who guards his mouth preserves his life, But he who opens wide his lips shall have destruction."* (Proverbs 13:3)

So we see the mouth can be destructive and also deceptive, and now we also see it can be hypocritical. It is certainly possible, if not commonplace, to go to church on Sunday and sing praises to God, and then on Monday curse and injure His creation.

All of this shines the light on the greater question, "How do we say we are full of Christ and His Spirit when this stuff is coming out of us?" This is a very valid question. If the practice of such is overt sin, then we are either not reborn or we have surrendered to sin. 1 John 2: 4-6 reminds us, *"He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked."* And in the previous chapter of that letter he says, *"If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth"* (1 Jn 1:6). Such sins are not ultimately against the individual, but primarily against God! Here lies the root of the problem.

Verses 11-12 tell us that not only should this stuff not occur, but in truth it **cannot**. Or at least it cannot if we have been reborn! Being born again renews us and sets us on a new path, complete with a new nature, new passions and a new drive. This could explain why so often many of us feel that our praise and worship hits a ceiling and leaves us feeling hollow and empty. Jesus remarks on this same issue in Matthew 12: 33-34, saying, **"...the tree is known by its fruit...out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks..."** So James is merely stating the obvious: that a fountain cannot give both fresh water and salt water! The tongue speaks only what is truly in the heart.

You see, one can trace these issues back to the beginning...back to when we first made a decision to come to Christ. How did you come to Him? What was your thinking process? Right from the beginning, many of us came to Christ seeking something other than a profound change in our nature. We were not seeking to be reborn a new creature who runs every issue of life through a new worldview, one where Christ calls every shot for His glory. Many of us merely came for ourselves, as a business decision. One that was essentially an investment against hell and a hard life. It was never about HIM, but only about US!

So what follows that kind of intellectual decision is a tacit approach to the throne of Christ. We tend to stand in the back of the crowd; a "one foot in the door" kind of policy. We seek to be "in" just far enough to escape the judgment of hell and the hardships of a life but without divine intervention, ... not so far in as to deny my flesh, my wants, my plans, and my opinions. Such a life is conspicuously absent of love, passion, or motivation to be like Jesus, to live for Him, to live through Him in every matter. Thus the attributes of Christ never effectively manifest themselves in our daily living in any kind of consistent fashion. There is no substantial growth or maturing because we really don't want that much of Him. We just want Him to smooth out the bumps of life and let us into heaven when we die.

But I am here to tell you that such a plan is flawed at its roots and won't work. It is to these whom Jesus says at judgment, *"Depart from me, I never knew you."* Plenty of folks will attempt to debate that judicial verdict saying, *"But Lord! We prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name."* But that stuff never actually meant anything to such folks because it was never about His glory and a life that lives out worship.

I'm not saying that a rebirth in Christ is not personally beneficial! **It is**. But do we come to Him with a real understanding of our sinfulness, the need for redemption, rebirth, and an actual change in our nature? A religious and moral credo does nothing to change our inside, our nature. Matthew 7:20-23 clearly tells us, *"What comes out of a man, defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man."*

Luke 18:10-14 tells the story, "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise

his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The latter was a man who stood righteous before God. He understood. He got it. He understood his heart without the Spirit's leading, so I would wager he had very little to say negatively about anyone else. His mouth reflected his heart, as it does for all of us.