

James 3:1-18

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[0 : 00] Good evening.

I'm Justin Tauert, for those of you who don't know me, but I think most of you probably do, because most of you are in my Bible study. I'm an architect here in New Haven and a member here at Trinity.

I'm married to Kelly, who you also probably know. She works as a therapist, and I've been involved with a Trinity small group for a few years now.

So we have a lot to get through tonight, so I'm going to start right off. First, I'm going to read the passage, then we'll pray and get into it. If you're intrigued or helped by what we talk about tonight, let me recommend two Tim Keller sermons for you.

They're called Lifestyle of Self-Mastery 1 and 2. There's a lot of what I'm talking about tonight that's gleaned from Tim Keller.

[1 : 06] So turn with me in your pew Bibles. I think it's page 855, or follow along the screen behind me. I'll be reading tonight from the ESV translation, which means it'll be a little bit different than what's in front of you probably, so just bear with me.

So we're going to read all of James 3. 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 in 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.

[2 : 25] The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed, and has been tamed by mankind.

But no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.

From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs?

Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. 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.

[3 : 37] For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder in every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, and 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. So pray with me. Lord Jesus, you are the most well-spoken one in the universe.

And in light of our words, we need to hear your words over us. Would you speak them tonight? Pray that you would give me your words, keep me from error. Pray that you would soften hearts and unlock things which maybe have been locked for a long time.

Open us to your grace and walk among us that we would sense you in the aisles tonight. Let me pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. So what if I said this to you?

For the next week, I want you to keep the tongue assignment. The tongue assignment is this. For one week, write these six things down and keep it with you and reflect on it.

[4 : 59] Number one, do not complain or grumble. Number two, do not boast selfishly about anything at all. Number three, do not gossip or repeat bad information about somebody else.

Number four, do not run somebody down verbally, even a little bit. Number five, do not defend or excuse yourself, no matter what. Number six, do not affirm other people.

The tongue assignment is just to keep that. This is like the moral law of the tongue or the six commandments of the tongue. And I know that for me, after probably 45 minutes to an hour, I will have failed at least two, if not three.

How about for you? And this is where we are tonight. James is saying, the tongue has incredible power, but is incredibly hard to tame.

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire, he says. And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. So, briefly, by way of reminder, we're in the book of James.

[6 : 01] We're moving through chapter three tonight. Specifically, let's keep a few things in mind about James. As Ian has been summarizing on these evenings, we have a pastor in James.

So, we have someone who cares very much about the sort of practical, on the ground, eight to five nature of our faith. In the entire book of James, 108 verses, there are 50 direct commands or imperatives.

So, James is concerned with doing. And that's almost half of the entire book. So, this is a good signal that James has an eye to the practical health of the believers that he's writing to.

So, here's a quick overview of our time tonight for those of you who are helped by outlines. These points are in your bulletins. I don't know if anyone has any. But I'll revisit them as we go through.

So, the first point, something obvious. Teachers are imperfect. The second point, how do words work? The third point, how bad is it really? The fourth point, is there any hope?

[7 : 07] And the fifth point, reapplying the solution to wisdom. But what I really want you to hear is this. And I hope by the time we finish tonight, this will be clear. We are healed when we stop trying to fix ourselves and are captivated by God's grace.

So, point one, something obvious. Teachers are imperfect. Read along with me. This is James 3, verses 1 through 2. He says, So, James begins in his idiosyncratic way with a warning to aspiring teachers.

But why? Isn't teaching good? Wouldn't it be good to aspire to teach? James, with a pastor's heart, is cautioning these aspiring teachers that they'll be judged with greater strictness because of their greater responsibility over their hearers.

James, essentially, is kind of saying, hey, teachers, be careful. You have a position of power and influence and control over your hearers. And guess what? God knows that and is going to judge in accordance with that dynamic.

Maybe another way to say it is words are serious to God. And the way that we know that is that those who have the most words are going to be judged quite strictly. So, God cares deeply about teachers, hearers, and their words.

[8 : 43] Precisely, maybe because words have the power to bring life or death. As Nick read in that Proverbs 18:20, life and death are in the power of the tongue.

And so, we see that. We see healing and destruction. And that was what was at stake for James. And that's what's at stake for us. One commentator says it this way. There's a clear complaint that too many of the Jewish Christians at this time were attempting to teach what they didn't clearly comprehend.

So, teachers are necessary, but incompetent and unworthy ones do much harm. But should this surprise us so much? I doubt it. I mean, this is pretty obvious.

I think we could all probably pretty easily think of biblical teachers either historically or personally in our own experience who have totally failed this test. So, I'm sure that there are more than two ways to talk about this, but I'm just going to talk about two.

So, maybe the first way, maybe you've been under a teacher. One who was manipulative or self-serving. Maybe you lacked the discernment to know if it was really wrong or not.

[9 : 51] Maybe something felt off. Maybe you felt beat up or theologically herded in a way that felt wrong or weird. Maybe it caused incredible pain somehow for you.

Is this you? Is there comfort in this passage for those of us who feel hurt, deformed, disillusioned by teaching that's been full of error?

God is saying in a very real way, they will be judged more harshly. So, we can release the disillusionment and trust him with that. We can trust that there will be justice in this particular sense.

There will be a particular day or time when teachers will be judged and called to account. And God's going to bring right every wrong in his infinite wisdom and plan.

And so, in this way, we're freed by faith to let go of bitterness, disillusionment, anger, resentment, the heart level, cancers. So, maybe the second illustration would apply to you because you're in a teaching capacity of some sort.

[10 : 56] I remember when I was told I was preaching on James 3 and I kept thinking, God, you have a sense of humor. The first week or two after I read this passage, I just felt it settle on my shoulders.

I mean, you know, not only do I feel the weight of the passage, but also the weight of my own sinfulness. I didn't wake up this morning finally perfect enough to preach. And nor should any teacher or you've got problems.

But teachers, do you feel the weight? So, don't shrug it off. Don't act like it's no big deal and there's enough grace to go around as you excuse yourself from right doctrine or even from kind words or from the constructive criticism of friends.

This is a heavy weight and if you're teaching, you don't really have the option but to shoulder it. You can't really opt out. And those who teach to suit their fancy or reach their personal or political or otherwise agendas, misusing and mishandling the word of God will be dealt with, says James.

But James is going deeper. He's far from done. Down to the sort of functional operative level of our words. So, follow along with me, James 3, 3 through 5a, as James answers the question, how do words work?

[12 : 14] So, 3, 3. He says, 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.

Friends, do you hear what James is saying? Do you see how backwards this seems? Let me read it again. For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he's a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.

This is so inverted, it's almost striking, but maybe not so surprising as we've been moving through the book of James. Here, James' thesis would go something like this.

If you could master your tongue, then you could master the rest of your life, and you would be perfect. But what's the connection? Let's look at the types of illustrations that James uses.

[13 : 17] He talks about a bit and a rudder. And both of these objects are far smaller than their settings, but the consistent thing in both of these illustrations is the directive, steering, course-charting nature of these objects.

It's almost like James is highlighting the tongue's directive for us. It can direct and redirect our lives. So have you ever said something realizing, did I really say that?

Was that me? There's a sense in which spoken words become a reality of their own. They're given a life of their own once they're out of our mouths. Or have you been on the receiving end of words like this?

Time after time, you've heard something, and it starts to have a very real sense about it. This must be true. We conclude. So step back with me a little bit in order to see a broader picture.

And to do that, I'll offer a question. What is speech most essentially? What is James really getting at? One commentator puts it this way. I think this is helpful. He says the tongue is so much more than what we actually say out loud.

[14 : 22] In fact, actual speech is probably only a small percentage of the use of the tongue. We cannot think without formulating thoughts into words. We cannot resent without fueling the fires of resentment in words addressed to ourselves.

We cannot feel sorry for ourselves without listening to the self-pitying voice which tells us how hard done by we are. So in effect, our words are thoughts with clothing.

And in this way, they're directive and can steer the course of our lives. They have a kind of life of their own. And I think we could probably spend weeks just on this section alone.

But let's move on because James has much more to say. And now he launches headlong into his final imagery for the tongue. And it's by far the most powerful and the most poignant. So here we are at point three.

How bad is it really? Let's read James 3, 5b through 8. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire.

[15 : 30] And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.

For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no human being can tame the tongue.

It is a restless evil full of deadly poison. Wow. What incredible destructive power James says the tongue has. And if this is reality, what do we do?

Let me read this again. 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. This is a pretty bleak picture.

James essentially says, no, you can't try harder. No, you can't get the 12-step tongue-taming program. No, you can't watch your words and try really, really hard over the 80 years of life that you may have.

[16 : 31] You can tame a killer whale, but you can't tame the tongue. You can tame a lion, an elephant, a mouse, a dog, a falcon. The most ferocious and wild animals in existence have been tamed.

But you can't tame your own tongue. And I think if we were to go to the Yale bookstore, to the self-help section, the emphatic message would probably be try harder or maybe switch your methodology.

You can do it. And here we have James saying, no, you can't do it. So the point is this. James wants us to feel the compounded weight of the responsibility we have over our tongues before a holy God and our complete inability to do anything about it on our own.

But this leaves us with a pressing and very practically important question. If all of this really blunt, really desperate, really difficult description about the destructive power of the tongue is true, and if James is saying you can't do anything about it, and it's going to stain you, and it's going to set your life on fire and poison you, then how do you heal your words and therefore heal your life?

What can we do? So point four, is there any hope? Let's read verses 9 through 12.

[17 : 54] James says, 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. Can you hear what James is saying? The answer to these rhetorical questions is easy, right?

He's listing them one after the other. We say, no, James. These things cannot live simultaneously. They cannot issue simultaneously. They cannot coexist. They cannot be together.

They are utterly and completely incompatible. He goes to great lengths to sort of draw this metaphor out. But maybe we still say, so what, James? I don't really understand what you're getting at in light of the sort of futility of taming our tongues.

So here's a big conclusion. So pay attention. Here's the hidden hope for change that James offers. But we have to work for it to get to it. If it's true that we can't simultaneously worship God and curse people, if those are incompatible, then this means that worshiping God as Father is the opposite of cursing people.

[19 : 17] Did you catch that? What James is not saying is this. With it, we bless people. And with it, we also curse people. If he had said this, then he'd be giving us the impression that we could heal our tongues through self-control.

If we could practice and practice and practice. You could try to stop cursing people as much and try to start blessing people more because the opposite of cursing people would be blessing people.

And then you would find healing for your tongue. And sure, you could do this, but James is saying, no, it's not enough. This won't ultimately work. He says, no, the problem is far more endemic and all-encompassing than just trying really hard and getting the right routine.

We need a true assessment of the problem, says James, and we need deeper healing. Trying harder won't work. So I wonder, are there any hard workers out here?

Are you trying hard? White-knuckling your behavior so that God and people will finally love you? As one of my favorite pastors says often, how's that working for you?

[20 : 28] Are you tired yet? Maybe your speech is a mess, your thoughts are a mess, and in ways your life is a mess, and you're stuck, and nothing has worked.

Remember that James doesn't oppose cursing people to blessing people. He opposes cursing people to blessing God. So the implication for us practically is remarkable. We are healed when we stop trying to fix ourselves and are instead captivated by God's grace.

And this is where we can get very practical and be honest with one another and find healing for our tongues and also our lives. Do you hear the sweet refrain of the gospel here?

Are your ears tuned to it? Are you familiar with the sound when God says, you can't do it, I can do it. This is just like him. I can prove it to you.

Here's three short verses I'll read to you. Romans 8, 3. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, was powerless to do. Or Isaiah 64, 4.

[21 : 37] From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear. No eye has seen a God besides you who acts for those who wait for him. Or Deuteronomy 20, verse 4.

For the Lord your God is the one who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to give you victory. The gospel of Jesus is always about magnifying what Jesus can do in light of what we cannot do.

I hope you hear this tonight. And realistically, we're going to go home tonight. We're going to go back to our lives, back to the various pressures, the various trials and difficulties that we're facing.

What can we take with us to sort of do? If James is saying, you can't do it, and maybe we've stopped white-knuckling and trying to change, where do we go? Do we just wait around and hope that God magically brings the transformation overnight?

How do we get to a point of being captivated by God's grace and find true transformation? A quick verse from Paul says, and we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed from one degree of glory to the next.

[22 : 52] So the key word there is beholding. And in order to behold something, you have to look at it. So to do this, we pray, we cry out to him, asking God to show himself to us. We get in his word where he's revealed himself to us, and we can see him clearly.

We run after him. We hold on to him like Jacob, saying, I will not let you go until you bless me. He's saying, look, look.

And here, looking is the doing. So practically speaking, everyone in this room probably tonight will fall into both of these scenarios, maybe a little bit, but you may feel more located in one over the other.

So let's see how this kind of applies to our lives in a realistic way. So the first scenario, maybe you've hurt others by your words. Maybe you've been reckless with sharp words in the heat of argument.

Maybe someone exposed your hypocrisy and you lied to cover it up. Maybe you felt the most loving way to stand up for God is to use your words as a weapon without any discretion.

[23 : 57] It was your duty as a true friend or mother or father, wife, or husband. And so you bludgeon people with your words like a club. Your words have been like a fire, like a deadly poison, tearing others down and serving to protect your own heart or prove you're right.

So remember our conclusion from James 3.10 was that we're healed when we stop trying to fix ourselves frantically and instead are captivated by God's grace. So how do we become captivated?

What do we do? Well, we look at the grace of God. So did you know that Jesus lived and died for this? Jesus carried your reckless words by his silence.

He was silent in his mistrial with Pilate. He was silent as the guards beat him and hurled insults at him. And he was silent as he carried the cross.

He did not speak. Do you see that he was carrying the weight of your reckless words? Listen with me, Isaiah 53.7. He was oppressed and he was afflicted.

[25 : 02] Yet he opened not his mouth like a lamb that is led to the slaughter and like a sheep that is before his shearer is a silence. So he opened not his mouth. He was silent for you.

So this is the first scenario. Maybe you feel more in the second scenario tonight. You've been hurt by words, the words of others. Maybe you're reliving a conversation right now that stings.

Maybe there are words you heard when you were very small which have kind of been burned into your life like a brand. Maybe God in his grace is reminding you of some words. Is there something that replays in your mind over and over?

Is there a phrase, a conversation, a single word, a name? Maybe this is something you hear in the middle of the night when you wake up at 3 a.m. Maybe it's something your father said to you when you were 10 or maybe something he never said but you wished he had.

Is it worthless, abandonable, ugly, unwanted? Maybe it's stupid or fat, dirty, unacceptable.

[26 : 07] Remember our conclusion from James 3.10 was that we're healed when we stop trying to fix ourselves and are instead captivated by God's grace.

So how do we become captivated? What do we do? We look at the grace of God. Did you know Jesus lived and died for this too? Jesus went to the cross so that he could speak wonderful words over you.

God gave his precious son in exchange for you so that he could call you precious. He says, because you are precious in my eyes and honored and I love you, I give men in return for you and people in exchange for your life.

Friends, if you're a believer in Jesus tonight, God has set his affectionate eye on you for millennia. Let that sink in.

If you don't know Jesus, does this tug at your heart? I'll share a personal example for me. In the interest of time, I'll just share one. There are probably a few hundred. For years, for me as a young Christian and still occasionally now, though thankfully less, I felt dirty, condemned, sinful, ashamed, and like God didn't like me and I had to be perfect to approach him.

[27 : 28] So here's my verse. Then he showed me Joshua, the high priest, standing before the angel of the Lord and Satan, standing at his right hand to accuse him. The Lord said to Satan, The Lord rebuke you, Satan.

The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you. Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire? Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel.

The angel said to those who were standing before him, Take off his filthy clothes. Then he said to Joshua, See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put fine garments on you.

So these were the healing words of Christ over me, and they've helped me to stop trying to frantically fix myself and become captivated by God's grace. In time, this is what's changing me.

Okay, so James gave us a solution. We're healed when we stop trying to fix ourselves, to do it ourselves, and instead we're captivated by God's grace and trust him to act.

[28 : 30] Now he sort of reapplies the solution to a new facet of our lives, godly wisdom. So the last point, point five, reapplying the solution to wisdom.

Read with me James 3, 13 through 18. James says, 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, then 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. So can you hear James saying, your wisdom affects your relationships?

[29 : 39] The question is not, are you wise? The question is not, are you trying really hard to be pure and peaceable and gentle instead of disordered and vile?

The question before us is, which wisdom is ruling your heart? James says, but if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.

So our imperative from James here is not to see what godly wisdom looks like and then try to get our hearts to mold into that shape. Remember, as James has clearly brought out for us, trying harder is not what he's prescribing.

Instead, it's as if James says, friend, which are you? Which heart beats in your chest? In light of all the tongue talk, he means for this to be an utterly practical litmus test for our lives and our relationships.

So let's say that your heart is operating on a kind of wisdom which is similar to a hardware on a computer. A Mac is the godly wisdom and a PC is the worldly wisdom, obviously.

[30 : 49] But really, what is James saying? If your hearts are overrun with bitter jealousy, selfish ambition, if this is your motherboard, the default mode of your relationships, your outlook on life, your way of viewing people, it runs throughout your family, your job Monday through Friday, your career aspirations, your dreams, you're constantly thinking about how to get what others have and how to get ahead.

Isn't this a wonderfully American mentality? James says, don't kid yourself. Admit it. James says, don't act like it's not true and then put on a pretty face and just try to be nice because that won't be helping you at all and fake Christianity is not really a fun game.

In fact, it's kind of foolish and boring and stupid, but that's just what Paul says. James says, don't boast and be false to the truth. So James, who's relentlessly practical, is eager to illustrate the actual distinctions between a genuine faith in Jesus and a counterfeit one.

Here again, we hear the distant strain of the good news of Jesus Christ acting on our behalf. Are your ears tuned to hear it? Maybe quietly at this point, but it's there. Jesus says, I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

So in the Bible, who gets saved? It's those who admit they're sinners, those who admit they're a mess, and they're not okay without a Savior, which is in fact what a Savior does.

[32 : 23] He saves. Those who admit they're in need of a heart transplant. And if we're honest, we have all failed this heart level wisdom test. So if above we saw that it was the worship of God and being saturated in his words over us that heals our tongues, we see here that James says plainly, if you want to have godly wisdom running like an operating system for your heart, you'll need to have a new heart.

Something radical has to happen. Our hearts, just as our tongues are in a desperate condition and trying to fix them ourselves and fix our desires is not going to help here either. This is something you won't be able to muster up for yourself.

And this, like our tongues, needs something much greater and more powerful than our own will and self-effort. We need the heart that accords with godly wisdom, which is a godly heart, as opposed to the heart that accords with earthly wisdom, which is an earthly, unspiritual heart.

So James here is saying very practically, this is just how it works out. Check yourselves. Look at your relationships. See which wisdom your heart operates on by the characteristics of those relationships.

Are you overrun by disorder and every vile practice or is there purity, peace, gentleness? Then you'll know which heart you have. Friends, I wonder, have you ever heard this verse, Ezekiel 11, 19?

[33 : 53] And I will give them one heart and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh. So here again, James reiterates what we saw in the previous section on our words.

We're in an actual state of heart in which we are able to do that which we need to do. We can't fix ourselves when we can't gain a godly wisdom that makes ultimate peace any more easily than we can heal our own broken tongues.

And James is stitching these two sections together like a fabric and the thread that he's using is our need for God to do what we could never do for ourselves.

Romans 8.3 says, For God has done what the law weakened by the flesh was powerless to do. And he's done this decisively and finely in the person and work of Jesus.

So look to him, friends. Look to him and stop frantically trying to fix yourselves. Look to him to be captivated by the grace of God on the cross and you'll find healing for your tongue, your heart, and your life.

[35 : 05] So pray with me. Lord Jesus, only you are up to this task. Only you can change our hearts.

Only you can radically transplant new life where once death reigned. Lord, pray that you would captivate us, that you would show us your beauty, your attractiveness, cause us to worship you, that in time we would find our tongues healed, we would find freedom from frantically trying to fix ourselves.

Lord, we're not able to do this on our own, but we know that you are able. You gave us a promise, Lord, that said, my God is able to make all grace abound to you so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times you will abound in every good work.

Lord, we thank you that you've done that finally and decisively for us on the cross. So we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.