

# FREED SPEECH

*SERIES: WISDOM THAT COMES FROM HEAVEN*



Catalog No. 110123  
James 3:1-12  
9th Message  
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January 23, 2011

For the first time in two years, I am in the market for a cell phone. It turns out there are a lot to consider. There are old-fashioned spoken conversation—but also voice messages, text messages, video conferencing, emails, status updates, Wi-Fi, tweets, photos, music, and . . . my precise position on the globe. Yet all of these concerns avoid the most important question of all: Do I have anything worth saying?

James is interested in that question. He is interested in substance instead of form, in content not packaging. He calls on us to walk our talk.

We've come to a topic at the beginning of chapter three which we previously considered in chapter one. Recall that James said we should be eager to listen but slow to speak (1:19) and he called for bridling one's tongue (1:26). Here again, in forceful terms, the nature of speech and the use of our tongues is set before us.

James 3:1:

**<sup>1</sup>Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.**

Chapter two ended with a challenge to those who were proud of words and knowledge without obedience. In this context James says that 'not many of you' should be teachers. Empty talkers should not be teachers.

I appreciate that James includes himself in this warning, "we will be judged more strictly." I am keenly aware of the responsibility born by those who preach and teach. This book is the word of God! Teachers must be held to a high standard. James accepts responsibility for his teaching and calls on everyone else who undertakes this role to do the same.

Jesus said, "A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher" (Luke 6:40). The one who teaches becomes an example to learners, not a mere dispenser of information. A teacher who cares only for intellectual information will produce

students with the same flaw. Teachers need to both tell and live the truth.

Finally, note that James is not saying that only a very few should take up the call to teach the Scriptures. His statement: "Not many 'of you' (in the immature congregation which first received this letter) should become teachers." This should not scare off godly men and women with a Spirit-given teaching gift. God supplies all that is needed for his children to succeed in the work he has called them to do. A teacher is responsible to study and take to heart what the text reveals. God-given responsibility that honors Christ should be received as a privilege, not as something to be avoided because it is difficult.

Having engaged the subject of teaching and learning, James now has a great deal more to say about the power of the tongue.

James 3:2-6:

**<sup>2</sup>We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. <sup>3</sup>When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. <sup>4</sup>Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. <sup>5</sup>Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. <sup>6</sup>The tongue also is a fire ...**

Human speech is powerful though we commonly try to pretend otherwise. "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me" is a terrible falsehood. We imagine vicious representation can be avoided by a flippant claim of, "no offense." James insists that words must be taken seriously. They set in motion great events, shape history, alter relationships, and they build and destroy. Consider the metaphors used here: a horse, a ship, a fire —all of these images convey great power.

*The King's Speech* won the Best Picture Oscar this year. It was about King George VI of England who was born with a terrible stutter. He was a generous and good-hearted man who was marginalized in his family and in his own mind because of his impediment. Yet, George VI ascended the throne at a crucial time in England's history. The dark cloud of Nazism, fueled by Hitler's speeches, was spreading across Europe. Could England's King speak to his people to stiffen them against the threat? At first glance it seems unlikely that a movie featuring a speech impediment would be a compelling drama. But of course it is—for the reasons James describes in this text. Speech is powerful. Nations are moved. History is changed. The articulation of big ideas and the proclamation of great truth changes everything.

Further, James gives particular attention to the power of words to wound—a fire can destroy a forest. Families are often places where hurtful speech does its terrible work. Some of you are aware of a recent book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, by Amy Chua. I haven't read the book, but many who have, decry Chua's embrace of language that is belittling, insulting, even bullying as a tool for raising children. The warning is important. Human speech is powerful and this power can be used in destructive ways.

Having raised the subject of families, let me put in a parenthesis, an aside from what we are learning in James. Parenting today is very difficult. The wider culture is toxic. Life is fast moving and communities are fragile.

Perhaps the best thing that parents can do for their children is submit themselves to the lordship of Christ so that their kids grow up seeing parents who are under the authority of a greater Parent. Active submission to Christ allows parents to be confident and vulnerable at the same time. It is not necessary to project certainty at every turn. God can be trusted. Confidence in Christ makes it unnecessary to recoil from the most recently published warning. Kids who grow up in an environment of faith have been given a gift, even as their parents fall behind in the race to live up to the latest study on 'what every successful family needs.' Assured parents and secure children are usually found together. Assured parents are those who know Jesus is providing for them. End of parenthesis.

James 3:6-8:

**<sup>6</sup>The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the**

**whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. <sup>7</sup>All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, <sup>8</sup>but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.**

The tongue is not only powerful, it is untamable. We are not capable, by self-discipline, of keeping our tongue from lies, slander, gossip, and other hurtful things. We are not capable of taming or disciplining our tongues. Being determined to change works for awhile, but eventually we feel threatened or grow weary and the pent up, ugly language pours out.

The reason the tongue can't be tamed is that it's organically connected to our hearts. Jesus said, "Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34). Our words will finally declare what's inside us.

In a debate with his enemies, Jesus was challenged regarding what foods were clean and unclean. The Lord said this: "The things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man unclean. For out of the heart come evil thoughts: murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander" (Matthew 15:18-19). We cannot tame our tongues because we cannot fix our hearts. We have a selfishness in us that goes so deep that it will ruin everything else: self-hatred that overflows into all of our relationships, fears so intractable that we wound our neighbors.

A person with a congenial personality will always know some folks that "just push my buttons." The buttons are there to be pushed. We sometimes say, "this person brings out the worst in me." Why? Because the worst is already in place, waiting to be brought to the surface. If we are honest we cannot disagree with James, "no one can tame the tongue."

Consider Paul's indictment in Romans 3:10b-14:

<sup>10b</sup>"There is no one righteous, not even one;

<sup>11</sup>there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.

<sup>12</sup>All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.

<sup>13</sup>Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips.

<sup>14</sup>Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."

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connected to our hearts, and we cannot fix our hearts.

Given these vivid descriptions of our desperate condition, we see in James 3:9-12 truth that offers us hope.

James 3:9-12:

**<sup>9</sup>With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. <sup>10</sup>Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. <sup>11</sup>Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? <sup>12</sup>My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.**

Simply put, the fountain is fixed by resolving the problem of the two springs. Our hearts can be changed by One greater than ourselves. We cannot cap the brackish spring, but God can.

He understands that we lash out at other people because we are afraid for ourselves, and he grants us peace. He understands that we are unloving in our hearts and therefore in our speech because we don't believe we're loved. He can supply what we need; making the source pure and our speech filled with praise.

Jesus once spoke to a desperate woman beside a well in Samaria. As they spoke about water and thirst she commented, " 'Sir, you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep.' Jesus answered, 'Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life' " (John 4:11-14). Jesus stands ready to forgive and change us, so that what comes out in our speech and behavior is living water from a pure spring. We shouldn't fool ourselves. We can't fix the patterns of hurtful speech in ourselves, but there is One who can make the spring water sweet. May we submit ourselves to him.