

## **Faith Works: Living What We Claim to Believe**

Faith Speaks

Pastor Deric Thomas

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### **FAITH SPEAKS** **James 3:1-12**

Brothers and sisters, good morning. We have certainly gathered here together because of what God has done for us in the cross of Christ. And the cross of Christ has filled us with joy and hope and life. The same joy and hope and life that it filled our brother from years ago, James. I don't know if you know this, but James grew up in the same home with his half-brother Jesus. There were probably many a day that James would say sinful things to his half-brother Jesus, maybe even falsely accuse Him to their mother Mary. I thought this week about what James, the half-brother of Jesus, might have been thinking about when he watched Jesus die on the cross. I thought what James might have thought when he sees the resurrected Christ before him, as 1 Corinthians 15 says.

James became a pastor, a church leader, in the early church. And he wrote this letter to mostly Jewish believers, and he writes to them as a pastor. And he teaches them about the importance of words, about the importance of the tongue. Probably had in mind what Jesus said in Luke 6:45, that out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.

James knew the power of words. He knew that there were people in his congregation and those Christians that he was writing to that had been affected deeply by the sinful words of people. He knew also the power that could come with words, words of hope and healing and help that surely many of them had experienced. And so James speaks, as a pastor, words to the people of God, and it's these words that we'll read and dive into this morning.

So if you would turn to James 3, and we'll look at James 3:1-12. But before we read this passage I want to tell you one of my first jobs out of college, one of my first full-time jobs was one in which I got to travel a pretty good bit. And my first big trip was actually to Dallas, Texas. And I remember making the arrangements for my flight to go to Dallas from Louisville, Kentucky. And I made my arrangements for my hotel room there in Dallas and for my car rental. I showed up in the airport excited, and I got in my rental car, and I'm ready to make my way in Dallas to the hotel. And I realized that I did not have directions to the hotel. Now, that's a challenging predicament to be in in Dallas. If you've been on the interstate there, you know it's quite difficult to get around.

And I was reminded of how so often in life we find ourselves going 70 miles an hour on the interstate of life, not really knowing where we're going, or not really recognizing the importance of the words that come from our lips. But God has not left us alone. He has given us His Word. In fact, we get to read this Word together this morning. And it is a great privilege for us to be able to even read it in our own language. You, brother and sister in the United States, have been given a great gift that you actually have the words of God in your own language when there are over 4,000 plus people groups in this world that do not have it. What a gift. So even as we read this morning I want you to, with thanksgiving in your heart, praise the one who has spoken. I'd like for you to stand with me as we read these words from James 3.

James 3:1,

*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, 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.*

Let's pray.

Father, we praise you this morning for revealing yourself to us, for speaking to us, the creature. Lord, we are your sheep and we are listening for your voice this morning. God, speak to us. Change our hearts. Make us more like Jesus as a congregation. Open our eyes and our ears. For the glory of your name, in Jesus' name. Amen.

You may be seated.

## **God Speaks...**

Now, before we see what James has to say about the tongue let's take a little tour throughout Scripture. A biblical theology of what the Bible says about words, about the tongue. Let's begin, if you'll turn with me, to Genesis 1. In Genesis 1:3, isn't it interesting that God Himself speaks?

### **Recognize the Importance of Words (Creation)**

Genesis 1:3, "*And God said.*" God speaks and all things are created. Humanity included. The words of God are powerful words that bring everything into existence. But not only does God create by His words. He has also revealed Himself to His people and given them instruction through words.

Look at Genesis 1:27-28. Genesis 1:27, "*So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. And God blessed them.*

*And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion.'"*

Humanity, before the Fall, needed a voice outside of themselves to tell them this is why you were made. This is your purpose, God says. And He speaks to them with words.

Turn to Genesis 2:16. Again, you see the words, God's revelation to His people, given them instruction, giving them commands. Genesis 2:16, *"And the Lord God commanded the man saying, 'You may surely eat of every tree in the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you will surely die'"* (Gen. 2:16-17).

God speaks. God not only speaks and creates, not only does He speak to His people, but He also speaks to Himself. "To Himself?" Yes. The one true and living God of the universe, who has existed in all eternity, one God, three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit said in Genesis 1:26, look at it with me, *"Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.'"* God speaks to Himself, and He says, "Hey, let us make humanity," and He does so by the power of His Word.

We know this when we fast forward to the New Testament in John 15:15, Jesus says to His disciples, "I'm going to teach you what I hear from the Father." The Father speaks to the Son. And then in John 17 we see Jesus speaking to the Father in His high priestly prayer. Father. Words. God speaks to Himself.

Words are so very important. In fact, that's our first point, recognize the importance of words. Recognize the importance of words. Yes, God speaks, but not only does God speak. Satan speaks.

## **Satan Speaks...**

Look with me at Genesis 3:1. Quite a funny tale that is true. *"Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God actually say, "You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?"'"* Which brings us to our second point.

### **Recognize the Cunning and Deceptive Words of the Serpent (Fall)**

We need to recognize the cunning and deceptive words of the serpent. Satan speaks. He contradicts, he deceives, he distorts, he twists. Notice, again, in Genesis 3:4, *"But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.'"* God speaks. Satan speaks.

## **People Speak...**

And that brings us to our text this morning in James 3 where James says people speak. Look there with me. James 3. People speak. Now, we all know that God has given us a tongue. And the tongue, interestingly enough, is placed in the most slippery part of our body. And God, in His wisdom, placed it behind a cage, our teeth and our lips. And yet so

often the tongue is used to abuse, and distort, and deceive, and hurt when it should be used to heal and to bring hope.

In fact, in the beginning when God gave us a tongue, He gave us a tongue to worship Him, to praise Him, to speak to one another in love and truth and goodness. Adam would wake up in the morning and he would say, "Honey, I'll be here in the morning." And she said, "I know you will." That's no longer the case, is it? People speak words of promise that they do not fulfill. People speak words that pierce deeply, names called, accusations made.

And in light of that, James says in James 3:1, "*Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.*" James, as an authoritative teacher in the early church, as a pastor, he knows the seriousness of words. In fact, this is a warning of sorts to those who would step into a teaching capacity without the proper calling from God, and the proper gifts that He had given. And they would stumble in with selfish ambition and jealousy, much like many false teachers do. And they'd talk and they'd talk and they'd talk. And every word that they share they will give an account for, as Jesus says, in Matthew 12. And those false teachers who stumble into the pulpit will be judged. But even those of us who are genuinely called, even though our judgment will not be one of condemnation, it will be one of reward.

### **Recognize the Great Responsibility of Teaching God's Word**

And James warns those teachers. He says listen, do you understand the great responsibility that you have to teach my Word? This applies to us all at some level, right? You may not be called to be a pastor, but you are called to teach. In fact, Jesus said if you're going to make disciples in all nations you should teach them everything that I have commanded you. If you're a parent you are called and instructed to teach your children.

Some of you are leading smaller groups of preschoolers and children and adults. Do not stumble into that classroom. Do not stumble into that living room. Do you understand the responsibilities of the words that come from your lips, especially as it relates to teaching God's Word? That's James' warning to begin with.

### **Recognize the Great Potential of Sinning in What You Say**

And he says this is why this is so serious. Look at James 3:2 with me and recognize the great potential of sinning in what you say. James 3:2, look with me. "*For we*"—again, he includes himself—"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 your speech is perfect then you're a perfect man, James says.

We know that none of us is perfect in our speech. In fact, we know that all of us have been born into a fallen world, and we have been affected by sin. And we were born into sin. In fact, Romans 3, turn there with me. Romans 3. Notice what Paul says about the tongue of the fallen sinful man or woman and its great potential to sin.

Romans 3:13 says that their throat is an open grave. That smells. That's worse than a man or a woman that wakes up in the morning and they haven't brushed their teeth yet. This is like a dead body, Paul says. He says that they use their tongues to deceive, to trick, to persuade falsely, to lead people astray. He says the venom of asps is under their lips. An asp is a snake, and Paul says there's venom under their lips, and they spit it out. Romans 3:14, "*Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.*"

Not a pretty picture of our tongues. In fact, if anybody could bridle their tongue, he says, he would be a perfect man. Some interpreters believe this word "perfect" means complete. And

surely that's true, as we grow as Christians we conform to the image of Christ, and that process of sanctification has its full effect. And we learn as we walk in the Spirit to have self-control. And as we control our tongues so our whole body is controlled, because the tongue, my friend, is probably the most difficult utensil in our body to control. You don't even have to move. You just pick up the phone and you can sin.

### **Recognize the Great Power of the Tongue**

There are limitations to what you can do in your activity as it relates to sin, but there aren't any limits to your tongue. Which brings us to James 3:3. James says, okay, let me give you three examples in case you're not convinced yet of the power of such a small instrument like a tongue. James 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."*

Okay, James. I was reminded of my time in Louisville, Kentucky during seminary. I had a part-time job in an assisted living home called Atria. And at Atria I was the assistant director of activities, which I loved by the way. I loved the people there. And as a part of the assistant director job, I became basically a master at bingo. But there were other activities that they enjoyed. I used to take them dancing. It is interesting to watch 80- and 90-year-olds dance to the Macarena and the Electric Slide.

One of the other things that I would do with them is take them to Churchill Downs, home of the Kentucky Derby. And no, I did not gamble, but I did take them. And it was something watching these beautiful, strong, muscular animals run across that track with these small men on their backs. And the men would pull the reins. And this strong, powerful animal would just smoothly glide around that track, and it was neat to watch. Now, at the time I didn't realize that that animal was being controlled by a little bitty bit right on top of its tongue. This is what James is saying. He's saying listen, friend, the tongue is powerful.

But if you're not convinced yet, look at James 3:4, he says, *"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."* I remember driving on the coast in Miami and seeing these large harbors with huge Carnival Cruise ships. And I never got to ride on one. But these huge ships would leave the harbor, and they would be guided so delicately. And they would hit the high seas, and they would make their way to their destination. There was a little old man up there in the top of the ship, and he would steer in this tiny little rudder in the back of this huge ship, would guide it wherever the will of the pilot decided.

And James said so it is with the tongue, brothers and sisters. Even though it is so small it guides the entire body. But in case you're still not convinced, he says I've got a third example. Look at James 3:5, *"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"* (Jas. 3:5-6).

Which brings us to point number five. We need to recognize the great power of the tongue. James goes from simile, it's like; to metaphor, it is a fire.

I have in my hands some water. (1) Because I'm thirsty. (2) Because I want to show you something. If you pour out water it stays where it lands. And I can see the spots on the floor where I poured out that water. But that's not so with fire. In fact, one little spark can set a blaze and engulf an entire forest and that's what James says.

Just ask your fellow American citizens in California of the power of a fire. In the wrong place, in a dry and arid forest—one spark. So it is with you, sister. So it is with you, brother.

The truth is that all of our tongues have, at some point of our lives, been used as an instrument that set ablaze pain and destruction and hurt and deep wounds because your tongue is fire.

James says not only is it a fire, but it's a fire that's set ablaze by hell. That is strong language. Hell? I mean, in the original language the word is Gehenna. Gehenna was right outside of Jerusalem. The people that James wrote to would have known well what Gehenna was. It was the place in the Old Testament where pagans would sacrifice children, and they would burn their bodies in this Valley of Hinnom.

It was the place that Jesus looked at, and He said this is like hell. This is the place that was prepared for Satan and his demons and the wicked. And in this valley they would offer up fire because they burned trash morning and evening, and so the stench was horrific. So it is with the stench of our tongues.

We've wounded children. We've wounded parents. We've wounded husbands. We've wounded our wives. We've wounded friends. And we've set on fire entire forests with our words. Now, if that doesn't depress you enough, we haven't gotten to James 3:7 yet.

### **Recognize Your Inability to Tame the Tongue**

Look at James 3:7 with me, which brings us to our next point, that we need to recognize our inability to tame the tongue, James says. Thank you, Pastor James, for helping us realize that in a world in which people try to get us to change our words, "Little Johnny, don't talk that way. You need to talk better to your siblings." "Yes, ma'am."

Somehow it doesn't work. Somehow it doesn't work for us as adults either because, well, James 3:7 says, "*For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind.*" That's funny, right? So often our dogs can be more tame than our children.

Or maybe it's like the big orca whale. We used to go to the Miami Sea Aquarium and take our children, and we would see this huge whale. And it could do all kinds of tricks. I mean, these people they had tamed this orca to do all kinds of crazy things.

Humanity has tamed animals of all sorts, but James 3:8 says, "*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*" (Jas. 3:8-10).

Would you watch this video with me that I think illustrates James 3:9 very well? I want you to see the words of a man and his wife to their children. Watch this with me.

### **Recognize that Your Words are an Indication of Your Heart**

You know what I've learned over my Christian life is that it's pretty easy to fool people about who we really are. But the people that we can't fool are those who are closest to us. Which brings us to point number seven. Recognize that your words are an indication of your heart, and therefore your true spiritual condition.

Our problems are deeper than just the organ that's in our mouth: the tongue. It goes to the very core of who we are. In fact, Jesus made this clear on many different occasions. Turn with me to Mark 7. And we'll pick up in Mark 7:14.

*And he called the people to him again and said to them, 'Hear me, all of you, and understand: There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.' And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. And he said to them, 'Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?' (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, 'What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person' (Mark 7:14-23).*

What Jesus is saying is that foolish words come from a heart engulfed in folly. He says prideful and arrogant words come from a heart that is filled with pride. He said slander comes from a heart that is filled with hatred. He says sexual immorality, adulterous words flow from the heart that has embraced false idols. He says that murder, hatred itself, comes from the heart. And James says don't you understand?

Jesus says again in Luke 6. Turn there with me, please. Luke 6. And He says in Luke 6:43-45, "For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks." Let me illustrate it this way if I could.

A few years ago I planted an apple tree in my backyard. I planted this tree because I wanted my wife to be able to pick these apples and make us an apple pie. The problem is the last few years that apple tree has only produced bad apples. And so I had an idea. And a few weeks back I went to Publix, and I bought the biggest bag of Granny Smith juicy green apples that I could find. And I went in my garage, and I got my heavy-duty deluxe staple gun. And I took that bag of Granny Smith apples, and I marched into my backyard, and I started stapling those puppies up there. And if you could have seen it when I was finished it looked good. And my wife got home, and she came out there, and she said, "Wow. You're a good farmer, husband." And I said thank you. And she started dancing because we now had an apple harvest. And I was happy, too, and my children were happy, too, because we were about to have apple pie.

Now, that's not true. But it does illustrate a good point that Jesus was making. A bad tree produces bad apples. A good tree produces good apples. Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. And so often we try to change our words by fruit stapling. "Yeah, you need to stop talking that way." It's much deeper than that. It's the idols that you've embraced in your heart that overflow in anger and hatred and dissension and wrath and fire.

## **God Speaks to the Fallen, the Dying, and the Hopeless...**

## **Recognize God's provision for the Imperfect Words You have Spoken and the Imperfect Words You have Believed (Redemption)**

Now, that's creation; God speaks. And Satan, he speaks. And people speak. And it's an ugly picture. But that is not the end of the story because God is the Redeemer. And from the very beginning God knew that what happened in the garden would have ramifications for all of creation. He knew that there would be wars that were started as a result of the tongue. He knew the destruction that would happen inside the home with husband and wife and children and siblings. He knew that, and He said I am going to speak a word of promise. And He spoke a promise from His lips, and He always keeps His promises, unlike us.

And He said I will send a baby. I will send a son. I will send a child. And that offspring of the woman will crush the head of the serpent. He will defeat the enemy of God. He will defeat the serpent. He will defeat sin. He will defeat death. And in the fullness of time God sent for His son, born of a virgin, born under the law to redeem those who had broken the law, even with their tongues.

God's gospel promise that He fulfilled. And Jesus came, and He lived, and He was born, and He grew, and He spoke words perfectly. And He never lied. And He never set people on fire with His tongue. He always spoke the truth in love. And when He died, He died as a substitute for rebels.

And not only has He made that promise to us, God has revealed His Word of gospel wisdom. James makes it clear in James 3 that what we need is wisdom from above. What is this wisdom from above James that we need? Well, it's not an "it." It's a "who." The wisdom of above is Christ.

1 Corinthians 1:24 says that Christ Himself is the "wisdom of God." 1 Corinthians 1:30 says that Christ became our wisdom. In other words, when He was on the cross as a substitute in our place, and He died for our foolish words and our hateful words, He was given our sin, and we get His righteousness, one aspect of which is His wisdom so that none may boast. And so that when they boast with their tongues, they boast in the cross of Christ.

God has become for us wisdom. And God has revealed His Word incarnate. Think with me on John 1. John 1 says the eternal Word, the logos, the second person of the Trinity, the Son of God, He is the one who is come. He is the one the Word made flesh who dwelt among us. He is the hope of the world. He did not leave us where we were, but He came to sinful people. And He lived among them to redeem them.

And Satan does not have the final word. And sin does not have the final word. Christ has the final word. God has the final word. It's the same thing that James said in James 1:18. He says "by the word of truth" you were made alive spiritually. By the word of truth God brings regeneration. He brings salvation. He calls His people to be born again. And when they are born again they begin to produce fruit as they grow. And then their tongue goes from being one that sets flames to one that brings healing, one that brings hope, one that brings truth.

This is God's work in the heart of His people. Jesus had the last word when He was on the cross, and He said, "It is finished." Jesus had the last word when He came to Thomas and He said, "Thomas, peace be with you." And Jesus will have the last word in the end when He brings all things to consummation.

Turn with me Revelations 21:5-7. In creation we see that God speaks. In the Fall we see that the serpent speaks. Even now we see that people speak. But in the end Christ will

speak again when He consummates all things. Revelations 21:5, "And he who was seated on the throne said, 'Behold, I am making all things new.' Also he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.' And he said to me, 'It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son'" (Rev. 21:5-7).

God has the final word. Death does not have the final word. The doctor and what they say does not have the final word. And yes, by His stripes we are healed. And everyone in this room who knows the Lord Jesus Christ, even if it's not this side of heaven, there is healing because Christ makes all things new. And there is a resurrection, and He will take our fallen, sinful body, and we will receive a resurrected body. And we will live with Him forever. And He will be our God, and will be His people. And we will see Him face to face in a city whose architect and builder is God. And He is doing it.

And if God has spoken with such powerful words, loving words, true words, then we, as the church, should speak.

## **The Church Speaks...**

### **Recognize Our Responsibility to Speak the Truth in Love to Each Other**

Point number nine, recognize our responsibility to speak the truth in love to each other. God speaks. Satan speaks. People speak. God speaks redemptively. And the Church speaks now. The Church speaks because we have received His love and His grace. And now we open our mouths, and we speak the truth and love to each other.

### **Recognize Our Responsibility to Take this Gospel to Our Neighbors and the Nations**

And as we do so the body of Christ is built up. And as the body of Christ is built up, number ten, we recognize the responsibility to take this gospel, this good news to our neighbors and to the nations.

Romans 10:14 makes it clear that if we don't speak they won't hear. And if they don't hear they can't be saved. How will they hear if we don't now open our mouths? We must open our mouths. When there are over 1 billion plus people who have never heard the name of Christ. We must, in response to His great love, open our mouths. When there are over 4,000 plus people groups who do not have the Bible in their language, we need to open our mouths, and we need to break out our pens, and we need to take His Word, His revelation to the ends of the earth.

When Isaiah the Prophet saw a vision, in Isaiah 6, and he saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. And the angels themselves were speaking, and they were saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty. The whole earth is full of His glory." And when Isaiah saw the holiness of God he bowed down and he said, "Woe is me. I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell among a people of unclean lips. But my eyes have seen the King." And then he says, with His lips, "Here am I, Lord. Send me."

Genuine faith cannot remain silent because faith speaks.

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