

## Getting to the Heart of Sinful Speech (James 3:8-12)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on October 25, 2009

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I want to confess up front that if there's anything helpful I have to say today it's not from my great insights or exemplary model, and certainly not because I have mastered this subject (which I have not). It's because of godly honest men like them who I'm learning from as well as learning from my mistakes, and I appreciate men like them who readily admit their own failings with their tongue and who point me again and again to the Savior whose grace can change my mouth as God did with Moses, Isaiah, Peter, Paul, John, others. James 3:2 tells us that teachers sin, even the greatest teacher and leader of the Jerusalem church, James himself said "*we all stumble in many ways.*" No one is perfect in their tongue, at least not on earth. That video may not have been exactly how your family was this morning, but all of us to some degree have at some times, been something like someone in that picture. James also paints a picture in this passage, and it's a scene we need to recognize ourselves in as we look at the mirror of God's Word. May God help us to see our nature here, the source of our problem, and God's solution.

James 3 <sup>8</sup>*But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.* <sup>9</sup>*With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God;* <sup>10</sup>*from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.* <sup>11</sup>*Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water?* <sup>12</sup>*Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.*

Spurgeon's book "Salt Cellars" captures how different cultures in history have articulated this:

"The boneless tongue, so small and weak,  
Can crush and kill," declared the Greek.  
"The tongue destroys a greater hoard,"  
The Turk asserts, "than does the sword."  
A Persian proverb wisely saith,  
"A lengthy tongue—an early death";  
Or sometimes takes this form instead,  
"Don't let your tongue cut off your head."  
"The tongue can speak a word whose speed,"  
The Chinese say, "outstrips the steed" [horse];  
While Arab sages this impart,  
"The tongue's great storehouse is the heart."  
From Hebrew wit this maxim sprung,  
"Though feet should slip, ne'er let the tongue."  
The sacred writer crowns the whole,  
"Who keeps his tongue doth keep his soul!" [Prov 21:23]

The Scriptures want us to guard our tongues not just for the sake of our own life, but for the sake of Christ and for the sake of others. In many cases, though God forgives, there are consequences from sinful speech that continue. Physical wounds heal, but verbal ones sometimes never completely heal without God's miraculous work. I don't know who first said, "sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me" – we all know that's not true.

Only a word of anger, But it wounded one sensitive heart;  
 Only a word of sharp reproach, But it made the teardrops start;  
 Only a hasty, thoughtless word, Sarcastic and unkind,  
 But it darkened the day before so bright, And left a sting behind.<sup>1</sup>

Psalm 64:3 speaks of people who *sharpen their tongues like swords and aim their words like deadly arrows*. (NIV)

The end of James 3:8 says the tongue is full of deadly poison. Like venom on the tip of an arrow is vengeance on the tip of the tongue. Men can tame Cobras to dance to a flute, but men cannot tame the deadly venomous snake in their mouth that can kill from a greater distance, and can spread through a community like the poisonous snakes among Israel in the wilderness, destroying many. Ever since the serpent in the Garden of Eden brought sinful words to this planet, man and woman have been sinning in their speech, even the most "perfect" couple ever (*"the woman you gave me"*).

Listen to how the classic NT passage on universal sin describes us:

Romans 3<sup>10</sup> *"THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE;* <sup>11</sup> *THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS, THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD;* <sup>12</sup> *ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS; THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD, THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE."* <sup>13</sup> *"THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE, WITH THEIR TONGUES THEY KEEP DECEIVING," "THE POISON OF [VIPERS] IS UNDER THEIR LIPS";* <sup>14</sup> *"WHOSE MOUTH IS FULL OF CURSING AND BITTERNESS";*  
 ... <sup>19</sup> *Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God.*

Our speech reveals our sin perhaps more fundamentally than anything else, showing our fundamental nature and problem inside.

Sinclair Ferguson said: 'When I was a child, our family physician used to ask us to stick out our tongues. (That was the only circumstance in which I was ever permitted to do that!) He seemed to be able to tell a great deal about our health by looking into our mouths. That is a parable of spiritual reality. What comes out of our mouths is usually an accurate index of the health of our hearts. Jesus said: *"For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks"* (Matt. 12:34). So here, as a spiritual physician, James engages in a rigorous tongue analysis. James 3:1–12 is a veritable pathology laboratory in which analysis and diagnosis take place ...

[This *"restless evil"* v. 8] roams the wilds, quick to defend itself, swift to attack others, anxious to subdue them, always marked by evil. It mimics Satan in this respect, who, having rebelled against the God of peace, can never settle. He goes to and fro throughout the earth (as in Job 1:7; 2:2), like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour (1 Pet. 5:8) ... It has an inbuilt need to guard its own territory, to destroy rivals to itself, to be the king of the beasts.<sup>2</sup>

The phrase *restless evil* in v. 8 pictures an unstable, uncontrollable creature that lashes out or attacks when least expected. He says “no one can tame,” using a word that’s only used one other time in the NT, for a demon-possessed man that no human could tame (Mark 5:4), only Jesus could bring healing. The phrase in v. 8 is literally, “no one among men,” only Jesus can tame, and change the tongue.

- Moses had a problem with his tongue (maybe including a speech impediment like stuttering) but God used him in his weakness as His great OT mouthpiece and Law-giver
- Isaiah saw himself as a man of unclean lips but God used his cleansed lips to be one of the OT’s greatest prophets
- Paul who once sinned with his lips by calling the high priest a “white-washed tomb,” apologized for that and recognized his heart was not following Scripture there, and though Paul to his final letter saw himself as “the chief of sinners,” it was his words that formed much of the NT
- Peter actually did like v. 9-10, blessed the Lord and spoke great things about Him one night but by morning he was cursing and denying the Lord with that very same mouth, and yet God used his changed mouth to build the church
- James and John, sons of Zebedee, wanted Jesus to let them call down fire from heaven with their mouths on their enemies, but He changed their hearts and transformed their mouths, and John became known later as “apostle of love”

All the greatest men of the Bible, James included, had in common problems with sinful speech *after they were believers*, but don’t miss the point: what they could not tame or change the Lord did, and the same grace that helped them is available to us as well through the same Word with the help of the same Holy Spirit. It’s important to recognize this passage addresses believers, all of us:

<sup>9</sup>*With it **we bless our Lord and Father** [terms for believers], and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; <sup>10</sup>*from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. **My brethren** [term for believers], these things ought not to be this way.**

How is it that our mouths can bless God in prayer before we eat a meal, and then moments later we use that same mouth to complain or speak ill of someone or some situation sinfully? How can a child talk nice to His Heavenly Father and then talk so disrespectfully to his earthly father in a relatively short period of time? How can we be singing thanks to God for the family of God on Sunday, but at home we express *anything but* appreciation for our earthly family all week long? The same mouths that sing “Holy, holy, holy,” are unholy – the lips that sing “make me a servant” one day a week speak to others like *I want to make **them** my servant* most of the rest of the week! Many people that are all smiles and best behavior around acquaintances at church are on worst behavior around those they love the most. We speak like angels before people we barely know and don’t care that much about, and then with the people we know the best and care for the most, we speak like fallen angels.

You say, well, yeah, that’s because we put our guards down with people we know well or live with. God knows that and God knows *that’s the real you*, what you are during the week in private, not at church or at work where saying the wrong thing may get you fired or any setting where you’re careful not to say what you really think

*My brethren*, James says, using a term of endearment for his own spiritual family, *These things ought not to be this way!* In *Pilgrim's Progress* a man named Talkative was “a saint abroad and a devil at home.” William Barclay wrote: “many a man speaks with perfect courtesy to strangers and even preaches love and gentleness, and yet snaps with impatient irritability at his own family ... for a woman to speak with sweet graciousness at a religious meeting and then to go outside to murder someone's reputation with a malicious tongue. *These things*, said James, *should not be.*”<sup>3</sup>

*Should not be* is “the only New Testament instance of the impersonal verb *chre*; it conveys the most earnest and blunt emphasis. Adamson describes James's language as “the strongest possible Greek ... spoken with all the force of protesting condemnation” ... Do we today have this same, intense reaction ... utterly unthinkable, abhorrent ...? Consider the habitual verbal abuse that occurs in our churches—how commonplace it is for us to speak of others with ridicule or with cutting remarks, how quickly we accuse others of evil motives when they do things we don't like and how easily we can have angry fights in our churches. Where is our biblical sense of shock at all of this?”<sup>4</sup>

James is not trying to beat us up for being *imperfect*, but he does want us to see how *inconsistent* it is for a Christian to be this way. It's not *impossible* for someone with a sinful mouth to be saved, but it's *inconsistent* with the power of the gospel, and James wants us to see our hypocrisy in all its ugly colors so that we will come to the Savior whose grace in all its splendor helps repentant sinners. But we need to see the source of what comes out of us – the heart.

<sup>11</sup>*Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh [or “sweet,” i.e., pure, satisfying] and bitter water?*

In Exodus 15, it took a miracle from God to turn bitter water to sweet. God's power is also needed to make our speech consistent.<sup>5</sup> How can a man drink of the sweet fresh satisfying living water of Christ in worship, and the same mouth, sometimes the same day, spews out bitter words like a fountain? How can we be humming the words of a Christian song we're listening to as we drive down the road and when someone in the car interrupts us or someone on the road cuts in front of us, something immediately comes out our mouth that isn't very Christian at all? How can someone speak so well of God and speak so evil against those in His image? (v. 9) The image of God in man was not erased when man sinned, even unbelievers are still in God's image, as Genesis 9:6 makes clear. To murder man, even verbal assassination (“you fool”), Jesus said is enough to make us guilty and bound for hell (Matt. 5:22b). It is only those whose tongues confess they are sinners and whose mouths confess Jesus as Lord and who truly believe in their heart in His death and resurrection alone to save them, they alone escape hell, according to Romans 10:9-10. If you're not sure if Jesus is your Lord, we would love to talk with you further about the gospel.

In v. 9 and 10, when you see the word “curse,” don't think of some superstitious curse like a spell or voodoo curse on someone, and don't think merely of what we call curse words (4-letter swear words, although it surely includes that). It's the opposite word of speaking well of someone (the word for “bless” in the same verse). It can refer to wishing evil and speaking evil, speaking against. I wonder if James had in mind the teaching of his brother Jesus about the Pharisee who while he was “blessing God” in the same sentence spoke evil against a man nearby

***‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.’ (Lk 18:11)***

Some even in worship as they “pray,” make others their *prey*! How can we be singing words that lift up Christ and then after the service we use stinging words to put down those for whom Christ died? Why are we so quick to judge and criticize Christians in the church or even leaders in this church or another church and to give them labels so quickly and carelessly at times (she’s unloving, he’s legalistic, that church is liberal ... be careful with terms / labels). Definition of legalism = teaching works of law make you saved or keep you saved and/or spiritual; liberal = deny core doctrines of Christian faith, inspiration of Bible, nature of Jesus. If you’re concerned with someone and their belief or behavior, the biblical thing to do is to *talk to that person* and try to get clarity about it, not talk to everyone else about what you think, judging their heart.

Should my lips poison others then praise their Savior? How can the sweetest looking saints use their mouths to smile so nice Sunday but then slice and dice you Monday? Why is it that a Christian mother or father can read their kids a Bible story and pray with them before going to bed and then moments later after leaving the room when the little kids get out of bed, the parent’s mouth that just prayed is now speaking so harshly and sinfully? Just this past week I had to get on my knees before one of my daughters because I had spoken in a “meanest voice” (her words, I believe). I had to kneel down, look her in the eyes, and ask her to forgive her daddy. She asked forgiveness for disobeying me by talking after bedtime but I needed forgiveness for disobeying God by the way in which I spoke to her, which was at that moment much more about my wants and desires and kingdom than God’s. This daddy’s only hope is his Heavenly Father’s grace. So we prayed together.

I’ve found much help in this passage, although I found much hurt and conviction in studying it all week in the process. I make no apology that there will be some pain for you as well when I bring God’s Word, but I pray I can also bring some of the same help that I received this week. It’s actually because of God’s grace that He brings conviction and discomfort in hard passages like this one.

God loves us too much to let us just feel good about ourselves and to leave us comfortable in our sin. But like a surgeon’s double-edged scalpel, His Word will cut away the cancerous sin within, and there is temporary pain, but this Great Physician also grants us healing. And we are spared greater pain down the road by the process. So receive conviction as a loving gift from a loving God by His grace.

Paul Tripp gives an excellent illustration of this: ‘It’s to my grief that I am not writing these words as an expert. No, I’m writing as a man in moment-by-moment need of the rescuing grace of my Redeemer ... My wife, Luella, and I have been married for thirty-seven years. During those thirty-seven years, Luella and I have had a particular struggle in our marriage. Well, it’s really my struggle. It’s over the issue of time. Luella was raised in Cuba, and she has a combination of a sort of island view of time and a Latin view of time ... People go to the islands because time slows down. On the other hand, I was raised by a man who thought that the sole litmus test of the value of a human being was punctuality. If you’re on time, you can live. It’s an understatement to say that being on time is a bit of a struggle.’

Let me illustrate for you. Once, when our children were young, we decided to go to a state park for a picnic, and we agreed we would leave at three o'clock. For me, a time set the law of the Medes and Persians that cannot be broken. For Luella, it's a rough estimate. At about 3:15 I realized that we wouldn't be leaving on time, and I began to get upset. And Luella informed me of something radical: we didn't, in fact, have an appointment at the park. No one was going to remove our table and suck the water out of the lake and roll back the grass and remove the trees. It was okay if we arrived a little later.

Well, all of that background is to help you understand the particular situation I am about to share with you. It was Easter morning in the Tripp family. I think that those of you with children can relate to this; Sunday morning isn't often the most relaxed time of the week. We stuff children in vans saying, "Shut up. We're going to worship."

But this was not just another Sunday; this was Easter morning, and our church, for reasons I don't really understand, had decided that one of the best ways to celebrate the resurrection was to have a full breakfast before the service, which meant that we had to wake and leave about an hour and a half earlier than the usual Sunday time. I woke up with feelings of utter futility. About forty-five minutes later, I walked into the bathroom where Luella was, along with my then nine-year-old son, and I could tell by the way she was dressed that she was not near being ready. So I began to say helpful things to her, like informing her that it was not an Easter *dinner*; it was an Easter *breakfast*. She found that very helpful. I told her that a couple of our children were already in the car, as usual, waiting. I reminded her that I was an elder in the church and my arrival before the ham and eggs was very important to my ministry.

About then my nine-year-old son said, "Daddy, may I say something?" I should have said no. I said, "Sure, you can talk." He said, "Daddy, do you really think this is the way a Christian man should be talking to his wife?" Now, I'm a counselor sort of person. I'm pretty good at these conversations, so I said, "What do you think?" trying to escape the conviction. And little Darnay, not trying to be impertinent, said out of his little heart of faith, "Daddy, it doesn't make any difference what I think. What does God think?" I slogged out of the bathroom being duly chided, and as I got to the threshold of the door, I heard his little voice say to me, "May I say something else?" I wanted to say, "No, no, please don't!" He said, "What I mean, Dad, is what does the Bible say about it?"

I went to my bedroom and was hit immediately with a couple of thoughts. First my pride reared up. I wanted to be a hero to my son. I was embarrassed that he had seen through my harsh communication, and he had hurt for his mommy. But that thought didn't last very long. I was filled with the wonder of his question. How could it be that God would love me this much that he would give a twit of care about that mundane little incidental moment in the Tripp family? This is just one moment in one morning of one day of one week of one month of one year of one family living on one street in one neighborhood in one city in one state in one nation in one hemisphere in the globe in one moment of time. And God, in the glory of his love, was *in that moment*. God cares for me so much that he would raise up a nine-year-old boy to rescue my heart one more time. That is love so magnificent I can't wrap my brain around it.

You see, that love, that redeeming love is not just a big-moment love. That love reaches into the private recesses of your everyday life. It reaches into those secret, quiet moments, even into seemingly trivial moments in a bathroom on a single day. That's how zealous that redeeming love actually is, and because of that I can have—you can have, we can have—the courage to look at this difficult area of our talk. The gospel is so robust we don't need to be afraid of looking at ... our world of talk, because Jesus *is*—and because he's our *Savior*.<sup>6</sup>

ILLUSTRATION: shake water cup so water overflows and comes out. Why did water come out of the cup? Because water is in the cup. What would come out if it had milk inside? Tea? Apple juice? When the cup is shaken up, what comes out is what's already there inside. When people are shaken up, what's inside them comes out. What is your heart filled with? Listen to what your speech is filled with? What you choose to fill yourself with will overflow.

Proverbs 4 <sup>23</sup> *Watch over **your heart** with all diligence, For **from it flow the springs of life.*** <sup>24</sup> *Put away from you **a deceitful mouth** And put **devious speech** far from you ...*

Prov. 15:2 says *the mouth of fools pours out foolishness* (KJV), or some versions say it *spouts out / gushes folly*. Whatever is in the pitcher comes out when you tip it to pour. Whatever is in the well comes up and comes out. If the reservoir is salt-water, it will produce salt-water in whatever comes out of the reservoir. If we are going to get to the heart of sinful speech, we can't just deal with sinful speech itself, we have to deal with the heart behind it.

<sup>12</sup>*Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.*

A tree can only produce what its nature is (trees at Apple Hill will not all of a sudden start growing olives or oranges or figs). The fruit of your lips is also determined by your nature, Jesus taught: Matt. 12<sup>33</sup> *“Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit.* <sup>34</sup> *“You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.* <sup>35</sup> *“The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil.*

The solution to a bad apple tree is not to take a bucket of good apples and a nail gun and nail the stems of some good apples to the branches (as I also heard said last weekend). That might look good from a distance but it hasn't addressed the fundamental problem. We can't dress up the outside with artificial fruit and not deal with the root, and neither will externalism or behavior modification do anything for us in the long run if there's no inner spiritual change.

Paul says: ‘What's going to happen to those apples? They are going to rot, because they are not attached to the life-giving resources of the tree. More importantly, what kind of apples is that tree going to grow the next year? Twisted, pulpy, dried, brown, inedible apples, because there has been no organic change in that tree. If that tree is producing that kind of apple year after year, there is something systemically wrong with the tree, even down to its roots.

Let me apply this powerful physical picture to our world of talk. I am convinced that much of what we do in an attempt to change our communication is nothing more or less than apple nailing. It has no energy to understand and confess the war for the heart that lies beneath the war of words. People aren't my problem. Situations are not my problem. Circumstances are not my problem. Locations are not my problem. My problem is in my heart.

... It's only when you and I stand before our Redeemer and are humbly willing to say, regardless of the flawed people that you live with and the fallen world that is your address, that you are your greatest communication problem, that you are heading in a direction of fundamental biblical change in your world of talk.

... There is no escaping the message of Scripture: *word problems are heart problems*. There's an organic consistency between what is in my heart and what comes out of my mouth. The struggle of words is a struggle of kingdoms; a war between the kingdom of self and the kingdom of God. The kingdom that rules your heart will dictate your words. But there is grace—glorious, powerful, enabling, forgiving, and delivering grace—for this struggle. Remember, there is no more present or powerful argument for our daily moment-by-moment need of God's grace than the words that come out of our mouths. Each of us needs to be rescued by his grace. Each of us needs to be enflamed with love for his kingdom, with hearts filled with gratitude, so that we will speak as agents of his boundless transforming love. Pray for the rescue of his grace so that you may speak as he intended. That is a prayer you can be assured he will hear and answer.<sup>7</sup>

Agree with Jesus that your speech problem is your heart problem. But then what? You say, ok, I see Scripture says my heart is the root, but I can't just change my own heart, you say. You're right! So pray "change my heart, Oh God." Pray like David in Ps 51:10, *Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me ...<sup>14</sup>Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation; Then my tongue will joyfully sing of Your righteousness. <sup>15</sup>O Lord, open my lips, That my mouth may declare Your praise.*

Don't be content with external religiosity in an unchanged heart. Don't just try and speak less or less quickly the sinful thoughts in your heart (an ok start), take sinful thoughts in your heart captive and be transforming them by renewing your mind in God's Word.

Ps 19 <sup>14</sup>*Let the **words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart** Be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my rock and my Redeemer.*

Ps. 141 <sup>3</sup>*Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; Keep watch over the door of my lips. [but guard our hearts (Pr. 4:23) as well as lips]*

Fresh water will never come out of a salty ocean (v.12b). If a fountain or faucet puts out bitter water (v. 11), the solution is not to go the hardware store and buy a new faucet to put on. Why? The water coming through the pipes to the faucet or drinking fountain is not bitter because of its spout but because of its source. What is filling the source will determine what comes out in the mouth.

Eph. 5 <sup>18</sup> ... **be filled with the Spirit,** <sup>19</sup>*speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord;* <sup>20</sup>***always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God ...***

Col. 3 <sup>16</sup>*Let the **word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom **teaching and admonishing one another with psalms**** [if they fill your heart they will come out your lips] **and hymns and spiritual songs, **singing with thankfulness in your hearts**** to God. <sup>17</sup>*Whatever you do in **word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.****

Psalm 71:8 (NKJV) ***Let my mouth be filled with Your praise And with Your glory all the day.***

May God in His amazing grace be kind enough to transform our hearts more by the renewing of our thinking more, enabling us to guard our hearts more so that we can guard our lips more, that we would be filled with His Spirit more and have His Word dwell more richly within us so that our heart meditations and words of our mouth would be more pleasing in His sight, giving more grace to others, giving God more glory, and giving us more joy in Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Spiros Zodhiates (1994). *Faith, love, & hope : An exposition of the epistle of James*. Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers (3:6).

<sup>2</sup> Sinclair Ferguson, in *The Power of Words and the Wonder of God*, edited by John Piper and Justin Taylor, Crossway Books, 2009, Wheaton, Ill.: p. 47-48, 51. Click [HERE](#) to listen or watch online. Book is viewable to read online at: [http://www.desiringgod.org/media/pdf/books\\_bwrld/BWRD.pdf](http://www.desiringgod.org/media/pdf/books_bwrld/BWRD.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> William Barclay, *The letters of James and Peter*, 1976. The Daily study Bible series, Rev. ed. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, p. 89.

<sup>4</sup> G. M. Stulac (1993). *James*. The IVP New Testament commentary series. Downers Grove, Ill. USA: InterVarsity Press (3:9).

<sup>5</sup> G. Holloway (1996). *James & Jude*. The College press NIV commentary. Joplin, Mo.: College Press Pub. (3:12).

<sup>6</sup> Paul David Tripp, in *The Power of Words and the Wonder of God*, p. 26-28. Click [HERE](#) to listen or watch online (see note 2 above for online book).

<sup>7</sup> Tripp, 31-32, 44.