

**James 3:1-12, No. 9**  
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**The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

We return to James after several weeks away. Remember now what we have said about this book, different as it is from every other book of the New Testament. It is a book of wisdom, the only such book in the New Testament. It is more like Proverbs than it is like any other New Testament writing. “Wisdom,” we have said, is a biblical term for character, for virtue, for artful living, that essential foundation of godliness that makes possible a life of true obedience to God’s commandments. It is not obedience itself – wisdom is not the law – so much as the sagacity by which one manages to obey God’s commandments. We have often defined “wisdom,” the Hebrew term *hokmah*, as the skill of living well, the art by which one actually puts into practice a Christ-like life in defiance of all the obstacles to such a life posed by the world, the flesh, and the Devil. There is very little *theology* in James as there is comparatively little theology in Proverbs; nothing about election, or the Lord’s death, or his resurrection. James’ letter is devoted to what, I suppose, we might describe as the “fine points” of Christian living, but points that have everything to do with whether and to what extent you and I will actually live a Christian life.

It will come as no surprise to you that James deals with our speech, and in more than one place. In Proverbs the words that come out of our mouth, for good or ill, are a principal theme. Our lives to a very great degree are a function of our speech: what we say and how we say it. I color-coded by theme the book of Proverbs in my ESV Bible and there were some 90 separate sections underlined in yellow, the color I chose to identify statements having to do with speaking and listening. In some cases it was a single line, in many others several verses together. But no one can doubt how fundamental to true wisdom is the governing of our speech and of our speaking *with the intention* of doing good and loving God and others with our words. So it should come as no surprise that James devotes attention to our speech.

**Text Comment**

- v.1 We’ve just finished a section in which James has reminded us that faith without works is dead. But “works” are not only actions; *words* are also works and so ours must be the product of our faith in Christ. [Tasker, 72]
- v.2 James regards himself as a teacher; notice in verse 2 the “we.” James seems here to be warning in particular of the sin of hypocrisy so easily committed by teachers: that is, recommending behavior he does not himself practice or condemning behavior of which he himself is guilty. It is worth noting that when Paul wished to prove the universal sinfulness of mankind, he cited in Romans 3:13-14 several texts from the Psalms having to do with speech:

“Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.” [Tasker, 73]

It is worth noting that the first sin following the fall (as we read in Gen. 3:12) was the speaking of self-excusing, condemning and hurtful words. [Motyer, 119] And when

Isaiah was confronted by the holiness of God and compelled by his vision of God to confess his sinfulness, the first thing he thought to say was that he was a man “of unclean lips” (Isa. 6:5). Nothing gives us away as sinners as quickly as our speech, for as the Lord reminds us, “out of the abundance of the heart *the mouth speaks*”! Our speech is the first and perhaps the primary evidence of our fallen state. [Motyer, 119]

- v.5 If a little bit in a horse’s mouth, no matter how powerful a horse, and a small rudder at the back of ship, no matter the size of the ship, can have such a powerful influence, well so it is with the tongue. The magic of words is a great part of the story of human life, but so is the damage done by mere vocables uttered by the mouth.
  
- v.6 Every forest fire that consumes thousands of square miles of timberland was started by a tiny flame: perhaps a cigarette butt or a spark from a campfire. Verse 6 is difficult, but the gist is clear. The tongue perhaps more than any other part or power that we have represents the unrighteousness of the world and of our own hearts and lives. And it remains a source of sin and of the consequences of sin throughout our lives. The fact is some of our vices drop away as we get older. Not this one. [Calvin, 290] No one yet, however godly, has managed fully to tame the tongue even by the end of a long life of walking with God. Such is our intractable tendency toward selfishness, excuse, pettiness, hypocrisy, cruelty, falsehood, boasting, and silliness, all of which comes so effortlessly and unbidden out of our mouths. There are two kinds of fire, of course, one that purifies and one that destroys. But the fire that the tongue sets ablaze is the destroying kind. [Tasker, 76-77] James seems to envisage the fires of hell reaching up into our lives and coming out of our mouths. [Motyer, 123]
  
- v.9 This is a searching statement. We complain, you and I, about someone blaspheming God or Christ; we may even write to the newspaper or the television company. But we hardly ever realize that our critical and condemning words spoken of others are equivalent to defaming the image of God in which those people have been made! [Motyer, 126]
  
- v.10 The fact that the tongue can be used for such holy purposes only magnifies the sinful use to which it is put so much of the time.
  
- v.11 Obviously not, for the bitter or salt water would prevail, the sweet water would be corrupted. We are being warned that it is the bad things we say that tend to be remembered and tend to have the greatest effect.
  
- v.12 As our Savior taught us, the fount of our words is our heart, their spring in this particular case. Our speech is the index of our true self. If ever there were a reason to control our tongues this is it: *we are our words* in a very real way.

Before we take up James’ main point, I want us to reflect on what an amazing thing the power of speech actually is. No one has proposed a serious explanation of how this power might have developed so recently in evolutionary time, why the gap between the other animals and human beings is so immense in this respect – what modern linguistic study has demonstrated beyond all contradiction is that no other animals have the power of speech in the sense in which we use the

term, nor has anyone remotely explained the fabulous complexity and creativity or the innateness of human language. We humans speak some 8,000 languages and all of us as infants and as little children learn to speak them with hardly a thought.

I read an article this week proposing human speech as another argument for the existence of God. The authors of the article argue that language itself, when considered seriously, is impossible to account for in naturalistic or materialistic terms. We often don't stop to think about this – language is so fundamental a part of our ordinary day-to-day existence that we rarely stop to ponder what it actually is and does – but in fact language is *immaterial*. Words, which are in their very nature are symbols, can be joined according to a set of rules, what we call grammar, to form an infinite number of complex meanings, none of which is material. Our words and sentences may sometimes refer to something that may be touched or seen, though they often do not, but the language itself is immaterial. It may be communicated in a material way – as words on a page or as sound waves hitting the ear drum or, for that matter as a digital message winging its way through the air to some computer or phone, but the language itself is not ink or paper, sound waves or computer code; those are merely some of the means by which the language is communicated.

Carl Sagan famously said that “The cosmos is all that is, or ever was, or ever will be.” That is a materialist concept of reality. But it is quite obviously untrue and has been known to be untrue for a long time. Language is not the cosmos. The world of words, grammar, meaning, and of the organization, manipulation, and communication of concepts, of ideas, of propositions is utterly non-material. And, of course, that means that the human beings who use language as we all do, who possess this extraordinary power of thought, expression, and communication, cannot be accounted for by matter alone. This the authors contend is an argument for the existence of God, a person not only capable of investing human life with this extraordinary power, but of using language, such as the DNA code found in every living cell, to organize, indeed to create, every living thing. The amino acids and proteins that make up the code are material things to be sure; the language by which they are organized and according to which they function and without which they have no function is not material at all!

So, as we begin, let us not fail to appreciate what an extraordinary thing the power of speech and communication actually is, how profoundly it separates us from all other living creatures, and how fundamental it is to human life, to education, to culture, to heritage, and, all of that supremely because it is so fundamental to *relationships*, to the interaction and communion of persons. We can speak because God himself is a person and as a person communicates and intended to communicate with us and for us to be able to communicate with him and with one another. So much of human life rests on this gift God has given us. It is our words, more than anything else by far, that connect us to one another. But, alas, it is our words that more than anything else drive us apart. It is this reason – the extraordinary power of speech but its so often misbegotten use – that makes the sins of our tongue so inexcusable, so harmful, and so contrary to all that a Christian ought to desire and hope for in his or her life.

This is a passage of particular importance for me because I am one of those teachers to whom James refers in v. 1. We think, of course, and rightly, that one of the reasons teachers are judged more strictly is because they exercise a great influence on the lives of others, teaching them what

to think and how to live. So how faithfully or poorly they do their job, how true or false the words they speak, and how well they speak them, has a great influence on how others live their lives. I'm sure that is right. I know how profoundly I was influenced and continue to be influenced by many of my teachers. However, I think part of what James is after here is simpler and more obvious than even that. The problem faced by a teacher is that he talks a lot and, as we read in Proverbs, "When words are many, transgression is not lacking..." (10:19); or, as we learned it from the King James Version: "In the multitude of words, there wanteth not sin..."

It is so difficult to control the tongue and my tongue is flapping all the time. People ask me questions, expect me to speak and I do, and far too often I prove James right: "no human being can tame the tongue." More than anything else in my life, and I suspect this is true of you, I regret the things I said and the things I didn't think to say. And I often regret the way I said something, even if what I said was acceptable or accurate or useful. But more often, alas, it is the very thing I said, not the way in which it was said. I remember the first time I came across this passage in a sermon of Alexander Whyte and how it arrested me because it was so obviously true, but a truth that no one had put quite this way to me before.

"Pascal has many dreadful things to say about the corruption and misery of man, but he has nothing that strikes its terrible barb deeper into all our consciences than this, that if all our friends only knew what we have said about them behind their back, we would not have four friends in all the world." [*Bunyan Characters*, vol. I, 184]

Do you, can you disagree? Not very long ago, not nearly long enough in fact, I made some stupidly critical remarks about someone else. I almost immediately – not as quickly as should have been the case, but almost immediately – realized how small-minded and foolish I had been. "Stupid, stupid, stupid!" I had to say to myself about myself ever since. I've thought about those remarks for several months now and the more I think about them the less well I think about myself. At my age, at my station in life, knowing what I know as an experienced Christian and Christian minister, with the heroes that I have, committed as I am to my principles, often as I have counseled others to do the very opposite of what I did, how could I have been so stupid as to open my mouth and make those comments. They were petty, useless, and reflected far more negatively on me than on the one about whom I spoke. I was frankly humiliated by my behavior and had to apologize to the man to whom I had spoken. Unfortunately, words go deep and are hard to forget and now I must live with the fact that they were spoken and may well not be forgotten for a long time, if ever. None of those consequences, of course, occurred to me when I opened my big mouth. Only too late did I realize for the umpteenth time the truth – so obviously true that one can find it taught by pagans as well as Christians – that one virtually *never* regrets keeping his mouth shut, but so often regrets having opened it.

I remember an *obiter dictum*, a casual comment or an aside, of Martyn Lloyd Jones. "Look back and think of the times when you were unhappy and you will find that it was almost certainly due to something you said and which you regretted [saying] perhaps for days." My only encouragement is that if Lloyd-Jones knew to say that – obviously truth gained from his own experience – he was not above committing the same stupid sins that I commit with my tongue.

Or consider this powerful passage from a sermon of Alexander Whyte.

“A holy man used to say when he returned home from a night of table-talk that he would never accept such an invitation again, so remorseful did such nights always leave him; so impossible did he find it for him to hold his peace, and to speak only at the right moment, and only in the right way. And, without his holiness, I have often had his remorse, and so, I am quite sure, have many of you. There is no table we sit at very long that we do not more or less ruin either to ourselves or to someone else. We either talk too much, and thus weary and disgust people; or they weary and disgust us. We start ill-considered, unwise, untimely topics. We blurt out our rude minds in rude words. We push aside our neighbor’s opinion, as if both he and his opinion were worthless, and we thrust forward our own as if wisdom would die with us. We do not put ourselves into our neighbor’s place. We have no imagination in conversation, and no humility, and no love. We lay down the law, and we instruct people who could buy us in one end of the market and sell us in the other if they thought us worth the trouble. It is easy to say grace; it is easy to eat and drink in moderation and with decorum and refinement; but it is our tongue that so ensnares us. For some men to command their tongue, to bridle, and guide, and moderate, and make just the right use of their tongue, is a conquest of religion, and in morals, and in good manners, that not one in a thousand of us has yet made over ourselves.” [*Walk, Character and Conversation of our Lord Jesus Christ*, 244-246]

As James reminds us here, “we all stumble in many ways.” I have been reading, at Mr. Pfefferle’s suggestion, a fascinating autobiography by John Wenham, the English evangelical Anglican scholar and churchman, contemporary and friend of J.I. Packer and John Stott, who died in 1996. Wenham tells us that as a young man and young Christian he was greatly inspired by C.T. Studd, the captain of England’s Cricket team in the later years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the young Cambridge University student who, with six of his fellow students, under the influence of the preaching of D.L. Moody, gave up his glittering prospects in England to go to China as a missionary. Wenham knew Studd’s life and work primarily through the biography written by Norman Grubb, Studd’s son-in-law. Studd had to come home from China because of ill-health, but then saw an advertisement for a missionary meeting which read “Cannibals want Missionaries.” Inspired by the need in central Africa, Studd left England again, this time for the Belgian Congo where he was to remain the last twenty years of his life. Inspiring indeed. Studd, remember, is the man who famously said, “If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him.” But Wenham goes on.

“Missionary biographies in those days tended to glorify God by telling you all the good things about the missionaries, but seldom revealing their weaknesses. Studd with his health problems became a drug addict, saying that heroin was one of God’s greatest gifts to mankind. This seems to have caused him to become somewhat unbalanced, calling on his fellow-workers to ever greater dedication. He asked what a tommy in the trenches would say when ordered to go over the top. He would say, ‘I don’t care a damn,’ and obey. DCD [that is, “Don’t care a damn”] was to be their response when they were frightened or discouraged by the devil. Sadly his society, the Worldwide Evangelization Crusade, had several splits and a number of excellent missionaries hived off in various directions, but after Studd’s death WEC leapt forward and became a tremendous missionary society.” [*Facing Hell*, 26-27]

We *all* stumble in many ways. Truer words were never written. That is a fact that is at one and the same time humiliating and consoling. But what James is telling us here is that – no matter the endless variety of our sins – all of us also stumble *in the same way*, that is, in our speech. Even the greatest of Christians had to repent of their sins of the tongue to the end of their lives. We admire, and rightly, Samuel Rutherford's devotion to Christ and the way in which his words have provided such comfort and encouragement and inspiration to many through the letters he wrote to parishioners and friends. But his mouth was also a spring from which both fresh and salt water poured out. It may surprise you to know that the man whom we love and admire so much for his devotion to the Lord Jesus was a man who made many enemies and usually by the things he said about them. Sometimes his words were true and perhaps needed to be spoken, but far too often he was rash and intemperate and offended even his friends when there was no need to do so. Well, if that were true of Samuel Rutherford, what about you and me?

Now it is surely interesting and instructive that James does not *here* tell us what to do about our selfish, proud, and intemperate speech. He doesn't give us advice about how to gain control of our tongues and to put them ever more regularly to good use and to put a stop to the bad uses we too often make of our power to speak. All he has done in these twelve verses is to warn us that we sin very regularly with our tongues, that our spoken sins do great damage, that there is no excuse for them, and that they contradict our theology in very fundamental ways. Actually, this is very like Proverbs, where also we read about the damage that sinful speech does and the good that holy and loving speech does, but are nowhere given a method by which to put the sins of the tongue to death. He doesn't tell us, as he might have done, always to think before you speak, or, at least more often than you do now, to plan ahead of time what you ought to say in this situation or that, or to keep a record of your ill-chosen words so that the lesson of your failures stays with you, or to keep a record of the speech you hear that is the sort of speech a Christian should aspire to, so that good examples of godly speech are kept vivid in your mind's eye.

Obviously, fundamental to the sanctification of our speech – perhaps more important than anything else – is simply to have clear in our minds how despicable our spoken words so often are. Motivation is everything in the Christian life and so nothing is more important than being genuinely convinced to hate our spoken stumbles and to love speech that is devout and kind and gracious and sympathetic and useful and uplifting. That seems to have been Rutherford's point when he advised John Fleming, one of his correspondents, "Make conscience of all your conversations," obviously something Rutherford himself should have done better than he did. That is, keep in the front of your mind the whole problem of your speech – whether spoken or written –, never cease being aware of the danger that is posed by opening your mouth. Remember that you often stumble right here and be alive to your penchant for using your tongue in the wrong way. The more alert you are to the danger, the more aggrieved by your sins of the tongue, the more control you will exercise over the words that come out of your mouth. This seems to be the Bible's primary technique in sanctifying our speech: to warn us of danger in order to make us careful about what we say.

You perhaps have heard the story told of St. Philip Neri, the Italian lay worker and later priest, famous for his ministry to the down-and-outers of Rome in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It is said that he gave a most unusual penance to a novice who had a fondness for gossip. He told the young man

to take a pillow to the top of a church tower on a blustery day and release all the feathers into the wind. Then he was to come down from the tower and collect all the feathers, now, of course, dispersed over the town and the distant countryside, and put them back into the pillow. Of course the poor novice couldn't find all the feathers, or even most of them, and that was the point. Kind words may stop at those to whom they are spoken, but tale-bearing, juicy gossip goes and goes, doing harm to many hearts. *Remembering that* is more important than any technique of sanctifying our speech!

But James has not left the matter entirely at motivation. It is not as if James has not already said something of very practical usefulness in this area of our Christian lives. Like Proverbs James talks about the same thing over and over again in his short letter. In 1:19, in a general exhortation to godliness he urged us to be *slow to speak*. Interestingly, there too, James uses our speech as a supreme example of our problem with sin. Being slow to speak, James says there, is one way of getting rid of what he calls our filthiness and rampant wickedness. He might have used other behavior as an example, but he chose speech and anger to make the point that you and I have a lot to do, a lot to look after, if we are to live truly godly lives in this world. In particular, there James reminded us that if we took care to keep our mouths shut unless and until we had something worthwhile to say, we would not only cut out a great deal of unprofitable and hurtful speech, but truly Christ-like speech would be a much higher percentage of the sum total of our words. When we considered that text in an earlier sermon, we pointed out that even pagans are well aware that the less we open our mouths the more likely we will speak to better effect when we do. But we Christians have higher reasons, nobler and more sacred reasons to be slow to speak than pagans do. James has mentioned some of them here. We use our tongues to bless God and so should not use that same instrument to curse those who have been made in his image! We will be judged for the words we have spoken. Ill-motivated and ill-timed words do great damage to other people and a Christian knows that he has no business as a follower of Jesus Christ damaging other people. Sinful speech can cancel out the good we do, and being Christians we desire to do good for the glory of God.

I was reminded again this week that there is abroad nowadays even in our own Reformed and Presbyterian circles a positive dislike of the idea of an emphasis on practical obedience; I mean talking *about* obedience, talking about *how* to obey. The too often discredited idea that if we only relax in God's love for us and concentrate on our love for him the obedience will come, as it were unbidden, that idea I say has resurfaced once again in these days. And the result is that there is among many of our folk, many of our ministers indeed, little interest in such practical instruction in the art of right living such as we are given here when James tells us to be slow to speak precisely because so many of our words would have been better left unspoken. But the masters of the Christian life through the ages will not agree with this disinterest in *the practice* of wisdom and godliness. They are all for taking practical steps, for learning the art of godly living, and for working at obedience, even as we look to the grace of God and the love of Christ for our motivation and to his Spirit for our daily strength.

In his little masterpiece, *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's instruction in Christian living addressed to the young seminarians of his clandestine divinity school, hidden from the Nazis as it was, we find a section entitled "The Ministry of Holding One's Tongue." It begins this way:

“Often we combat our evil thoughts most effectively if we absolutely refuse to allow them to be expressed in words. It is certain that the spirit of self-justification can be overcome only by the Spirit of grace; nevertheless, isolated thoughts of judgment can be curbed and smothered by never allowing them the right to be uttered, except as a confession of sin.... He who holds his tongue in check controls both mind and body (Jas, 3:2ff.). [91-92]

The context of obedience, you see, is that of divine grace and the necessity of the Spirit’s help, but the instruction is practical and direct. *Shut up* about your critical, self-justifying speech. Just make it a practice of keeping your mouth shut, which, after all, is what James told us here. Bonhoeffer went on to make it a rule for their small seminary community that it was simply forbidden to speak about a brother if he were absent and not present in the conversation, “even under the cloak of help and good will; for it is precisely in this guise that the spirit of hatred among brothers always creeps in when it is seeking to create mischief.” He, wise man that he was, admitted that there would be exceptions, but he wanted such occasions to be clearly exceptions to a general rule that was otherwise strictly obeyed. And he promised his students this, should they obey the rule with real intention:

“Where this discipline of the tongue is practiced right from the beginning, each individual will make a matchless discovery. He will be able to cease from constantly scrutinizing the other person, judging him, condemning him, putting him in his particular place where he can gain ascendancy over him and thus doing violence to him as a person. Now he can allow the brother to exist as a completely free person, as God made him to be. His view expands and, to his amazement, for the first time he sees, shining above his brethren, the richness of God’s creative glory. God did not make this person as I would have made him. He did not give him to me as a brother for me to dominate and control, but in order that I might find above him the Creator. ... God does not will that I should fashion the other person according to the image that seems good to me, that is, my own image; rather in his very freedom from me God made this person in His image. I can never know beforehand how God’s image should appear in others. ... To me the sight may seem strange, even ungodly. But God creates every man in the likeness of his Son, the Crucified. After all, even that image certainly looked strange and ungodly to me before I grasped it.” [92-93]

Surely wise words, don’t you think? Is that not what God desires from us and is that not what we ourselves desire for ourselves from others? Be slow to speak. Think before you speak. Consider your words. Realize how powerful they are and weigh them before you speak them. All of this is what is meant by “be slow to speak.” Now wise Christians have often reduced that general rule to be slow to speak to more specific applications.

1. A common one among the masters of the Christian life through Christian history is, whatever else you talk about, *don’t talk about yourself!* What does it mean to be slow to speak in very practical terms? Well, it means this to begin with: stop talking so much about yourself, stop this constant drawing attention to yourself, your opinions, your views of people and things, your likes and dislikes. A great deal of harmful speech would be eliminated if only this rule were followed. *Don’t talk about myself.*



2. Another one is simpler still. *Don't be the one who talks the most in any group.* School yourself to speak less than others. If you are alert to the ratio, it is amazing how it will shut you up. I have found it so.

3. Don't ever talk to others about someone you dislike or someone who has offended you unless it is to praise him. This is a rule that may be easier to follow than you think. You may find yourself thinking a great deal about that person, if he has offended you, you will certainly think a great deal about that person, and, if honest, you will have no difficulty detecting the vengeance in your thinking. But if you have made a rule of this for yourself you will know at the same time that you are forbidden to utter those thoughts, that it will be a moral failure on your part to do so, and an act of disloyalty to God to do so. I have found this so. I can be quiet about those I am sorely tempted to dislike simply because it is so obvious to me that I cannot trust myself to speak about the person in a way that would both please God and reflect well on myself.

Such simple rules as these are easier to remember and to practice than the more general ones, such as 1) think before you speak; 2) consider the likely consequence of your words; and so on. Speaking comes too naturally to us and we do too much of it throughout a day to be able to think through everything we are going to say before we say it. The art of godly speech, James is telling us, is to find simple ways to cut out the particularly bad forms of speech and those forms are almost always the same: the speech we utter about ourselves and the words we speak about people we don't like or with whom we disagree or toward whom we carry some grudge. Cut out the big stuff, the obvious stuff and see what a difference *that* makes. Then you can go on to refine your speech making it in every way the servant of the new man and not of the old. That, James says, is wisdom!