

Faith that Works: Who's your Daddy?

James 3:1-12
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~If your tongue is forked, then Jesus isn't your Daddy~

[Pray]

If you are new with us this week we are in the middle of a series through what is likely the earliest document of the New Testament. James was the pastor of the church in Jerusalem, and he was the half brother of Jesus – the son of Mary and Joseph.

And one thing we know about James was that during Jesus' life James didn't believe in Him. He thought Jesus was off His rocker. He thought the things Jesus said weren't founded in reality. And in some ways it's hard to fault him for this – after all none of his other siblings were claiming to be God.

It wasn't until after Jesus rose from the dead that the lights went on for James, and then I imagine he spent a lot of time reflecting on the ways he had treated Jesus, and perhaps the things he had said to Jesus.

While we don't have any specifics on this, in his introduction of this letter James refers to himself, as “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” rather than as Jesus' little brother. And arguably this is because he recognized that his family or blood connection to Jesus was worth nothing – his salvation came to him just like it comes to the rest of us, by grace and through faith.

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Now in today's text we are talking about the tongue and the power of the spoken word, but as I say this I want to stop for just a second and make what I believe is an important comment. As soon as we say we are talking about words this could sound like the start of a moralistic talk about how it is important to be kind, and not tear people down and not gossip. But that's not what this text is about.

As we are going to see words aren't just things James calls us to be careful with, in the same way we are careful with a sharp knife, rather our words are the “God thermometer” in our lives that points to who our daddy is. And so James isn't calling us to speak politely, he is informing us that the vocalized expressions that escape our lips are in fact one of the main ways we image our God – whoever that might be.

So let me introduce our text today by bringing us back to the very beginning of the Bible and the first recorded spoken words.¹

¹ Connection to Genesis adapted from David Platt “Exalting Jesus in James” (Nashville: Holman Reference), 2014. pg 71-73

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

And God **said**, "Let there be light," and there was light. (Gen 1:1-3)

Now this might sound a bit like the first line in a well written novel which is designed to both immediately draw the reader in as well as set up the context – and I suppose to a certain extent it is that. But it is not coincidence that the very first words spoken mark the beginning of creation.

Our story begins with the words "And God said..." And this statement appears 9 times in the first chapter in Genesis and tells us something about God. YHWH is the God of infinite power such that even His breath forms things out of nothing. God willed, God spoke, and everything in creation sprung into being in obedience to His command.

Now catch this, there was no debate. Light didn't argue "I don't feel like it." Satan didn't say "I prefer the darkness." God spoke and there simply was.

And the point here is that right from the very beginning the spoken word is not just something powerful – like atomic energy that can be used for good or evil – it is the vehicle of God's creative power.

This is unique to the Judea-Christian story. In other creation myths, like the Enuma Elish which is the Babylonian creation story, the world grows out of the body of a defeated and murdered god – it's the result of cosmic battle.² But in YHWH's story there is no struggle. His word pierces the darkness and effortlessly brings forth light and life. This is absolute power.

And God doesn't just use His word to create; He also uses it to relate. And the first person we see Him relating to is Himself. Now this might seem a bit funny since the Bible says there is only one God³, but it also teaches that He is three persons – Father, Son and Spirit⁴ - we call this the Trinity. And while this doesn't get fully unpacked until the New Testament way back in the first chapter of Genesis we get a hint towards it. We read:

Then God **said**, "Let Us make mankind in Our image, in Our likeness" (Genesis 1:26)

So as Creation springs into existence God's speech reveals that His is relational, and He speaks and plans to create a being like Himself. And then He uses His word to endow this creature – human – with purpose:

² <http://www.crystalinks.com/enumaelish.html>

³ Deuteronomy 6:4 "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one."

⁴ John 14:26 "But... the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My [Jesus'] name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."

So God created mankind in His own image,
in the image of God He created them;
male and female He created them.

God blessed them and **said** to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (Genesis 1:27-28)

As soon as Adam and Eve breathe God speaks to them. This is before sin enters the world. And yet the word He gives proves they needed a voice outside themselves to give them purpose. God said "have babies and rule" – this is our job.

Then in Genesis 2 God's spoken word gives us the framework for our relationship with Him. He says:

"You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die." Genesis 2:16-17)

Do you see the role that speech is playing in our story? So God values His word, and while we possess His ability for word we are not Him. He is Creator, we are creature. He is God we are the reflection of God. And so to fulfill our potential we have to obey His word because that is where life resides. To step outside obedience brings death like a fish out of water.

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Enter scene two, and the second being to speak:

Now the serpent... **said** to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" (Genesis 3:1)

Now Satan is not God's arch nemesis – he might like us to think that, but an arch nemesis is a villain of equal power, and Satan isn't that. And so while Satan speaks notice that his words don't bring anything into existence. His power comes as he distorts and twists God's word. And so while he is totally inferior Satan becomes the god of everyone who distorts and twists YHWH's truth.

So Jesus chastised the religious leaders of His day saying:

You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. (John 8:44)

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So God speaks – He is the Father of Creation and life; and Satan speaks – he is the father of destruction and lies, and with that backdrop turn with me to James

chapter 3 where James tackles the topic of people speaking. And he wants us to ask ourselves “who’s your daddy?”

Look at verse 1

[Read James 3:1-2]

Now in this section James is continuing his theme from chapter 2. And the main verse in the last section we looked at was verse 14. It reads:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? (James 2:14)

And the obvious answer to that rhetorical question as Francis Chan brought out for us, is “no.” James says if the things you do don’t line up with what you believe then your faith is worthless. It doesn’t matter that you prayed a prayer full of magic words; “Jesus come into my heart.” In 2:19 James says it doesn’t even matter that you believe there is “one God”⁵ – even the demons believe that, but they’re not saved because in spite of their belief they don’t live their lives to God’s glory. So the theme of James is that our faith only counts when it is backed up by our actions.

And in that vein he starts talking about the words that come out of our mouths. And he begins by warning people not to lightly set themselves up as teachers. So if you are a pastor or a Care Group leader or a Sunday School teacher, or anyone that people go to when they want to know something about God or the Bible then James is specifically warning us.

And he says teachers get judged more strictly. The holy God of the universe sets the standard higher when it comes to people who are listened to. And He does this because we possess the power to affect the eternal destinies of the people around us – particularly those in the church.

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Now we live in an interesting time. Today everyone wants their voice to be heard. We all have an opinion about what the Bible says, and we like to share it – don’t we? But James says this isn’t a comfortable place because God doesn’t treat the spoken word lightly.

“Oh, but I’m careful with what I say when it comes to the Bible.” – Good, but in verse 2 James says everyone messes this up. We all sin. And when we sin with our mouths this is a particularly big deal because our words are endowed with the power of God.

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⁵ Deuteronomy 6:4

Really? The things we say are as big a deal or bigger than the things we do? Isn't this a bit over stated? James doesn't think so. Consider this: haven't the worst atrocities the world has ever known been made possible by speech? Wasn't it Hitler's rhetoric that captured the nation?

Or how often in the media lately have we heard stories of people being deeply affected by what other's say about or to them? I googled "Teen commits suicide after being bullied" and the search engine spit back 1,410,000 results in .50 seconds of searching. This is the world we live in.

But don't get down on the 21st century, this is nothing new. The world we live in is not worse than it has ever been. That kind of thinking is called the "Golden Age Fallacy" – things were better when I was a kid. But James was talking about this same problem 2000 years ago. And a thousand years before that king Solomon wrote:

The tongue has the power of life and death... (Proverbs 18:21)

And

The words of the reckless pierce like swords... (Proverbs 12:18)

So our culture hasn't invented twisted and distorted speech. We aren't the first people to destroy each other with words – this has been happening ever since the deceiver spoke and we listened. We live in a world of sin.

And James says if you are someone who never says the wrong thing, never tears anyone down with your tongue, then you are perfect. You can actually get rid of every sin in your life – you can control your whole body if you can bridle your tongue. And he gives three illustrations.

Look at verse 3

[Read James 3:3-8]

Reins, rudders, wildfire. What is James getting at here?

I remember very clearly the first time I rode a horse. I was 12 years old and in Kelowna at my cousin's house. They had a farm and a couple horses and Lisa, a year older than me, saddled me up on her old gray mare for a nice meander in the meadow. I was excited.

She carefully explained how the reins worked but I shrugged it off – how hard could it be, I've watched westerns. And the glue factory prospect I was riding looked like she was capable of about 8km/h.

Once my feet were in the stirrups and I was sitting confidently in the saddle, Lisa gracefully mounted her young, jet black mare in a flash and took off at full gallop. The wind was peacefully blowing across the wildflowers, and for at least a tenth of a second everything was perfect.

And then there was a countenance shift in the beast I sat upon – or at least it seemed that way to me. Her ears went back and she did the one thing she had spent her entire life doing, following her master – and it wasn't me.

Good thing I didn't waste any time listening to the speech about the reins, I wasn't holding on to them anyway. I was gripping the horn with two hands, while my knees dug desperately into the under-belly of the horse as I galloped the entire length of the field totally parallel with the ground which was rushing past my left ear at breakneck speeds. I stayed on – true story. And that was at least 8 seconds!

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I'm glad to tell you I don't have a similar story about piloting a sea vessel. James' point is: control the reins, control the rudder, control the ride. That's how it's supposed to work. But the problem is the tongue, it's a wildfire sparked to flame by hell itself, it's a world of evil which because it is impossible to perfectly control results in the entire body turning into missile of mass destruction.

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But here there is the twist in the text. And I think we often miss this. The tongue is small it should be the rein, it should be the rudder, that controls the beast or ship, but it's not. Actually the tongue is the galloping beast and the tossing ship. The tongue doesn't control our body, the tongue is controlled by something else. So Jesus says:

No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. ***For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.*** (Luke 6:43-45)

So the tongue isn't where the health or sickness starts in a person, it isn't the thermostat that controls the temperature of the soul. Instead it's a thermometer that simply states where the soul is at. And so when words slip off our tongues that destroy and cut down they aren't a small problem in an otherwise healthy person. They are symptomatic of the cancer that is running rampant in the heart.

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Let me bring this close to home. I'm going to give a couple examples of what this looks like, and I ask you to prepare yourself for this in two ways.

First, in this text James is not saying watch out for these problems in the people around you. He's not talking about our neighbours or our spouses or our kids so resist the temptation to say "boy I sure am glad so and so is hearing this, they need it." Instead let James' words diagnose the sickness in your heart. That's the first thing.

And second, resist the temptation to get defensive. Nobody feels comfortable when the sun shines on their sin, but don't justify yourself before the word of God. Don't say "I only lose control of my tongue when I don't get enough sleep." Or I wouldn't say things like that if my spouse would give me some respect." Instead own the problem. James says "We all stumble in many ways," so allow the text to speak, hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to you. Alright, here we go.

Some of us have a propensity to snap. You know who you are. Anger bubbles below the surface, and when you are stressed, or someone pushes your buttons then the dynamite goes off and your voice gets loud and you don't let anyone get a word in edgewise. And some of the things you say are intended to hurt in the moment. You do it on purpose. You have an angry heart. Don't deny it, don't justify it. Jesus says "It comes out of your mouth because it is in your heart."

Or how about this, some of us lack confidence and are jealous of the abilities of others. This is where I've struggled. And so you are always trying to one-up the people around you. You love it when people notice how good you are at something. So maybe you are the best salesman at your office – you sell more; or the best parent or grandparent in your circle of friends – you do the right thing with your kids, and you can't believe how daft everyone else is. Or maybe you are the best preacher at your church. Whatever it is you find your self-worth and identity in what you do well.

And then somebody comes into your office and their numbers outperform yours. And people say "Wow, Stan is really great with his customers, they love him and it shows!" And you say, "Yeah, I've been watching him, and I bet we are going to find out he has been cheating."

Or someone says "Wow, Jane sure is great with her kids isn't she?" And you say, "You think so? Sure they sit still, but she controls them so strictly, one of them is going to turn into a serial killer, you just watch."

Or someone says "Didn't that guest speaker just nail that text – what a great preacher." And you say "Yeah, everyone has their 'on' days."

Instead of being able to celebrate when people around you succeed you tear them down because you're jealous and your identity is at stake.⁶

⁶ This thoughts on anger and jealousy adapted from Matt Chandler's sermon "Blessings/Curses" <http://www.thevillagechurch.net/resources/sermons/detail/blessings--curses/> (Accessed February 19, 2016)

And so your tongue shoots off and brings death instead of life. If this is you don't justify yourself. Don't say I don't lack confidence; I'm not desperate for people's approval, I'm just competitive and like to be the best at what I do. The foundation of your identity is in the wrong place. Own it. Jesus says your tongue and the words that come out of your mouth are the evidence of what is in your heart.

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Now look at verse 9.

[Read James 3:9-12]

Do you see how similar James' words here are to the words of Jesus we just read? James says church folk have strange tongues. We praise like we were designed and then we destroy with the same tongues! This is salt water coming out of a mountain spring, this is a fig tree producing olives, this is a problem – and it's bigger than we think. This is an identity issue, this is a daddy issue.

Friends, if your fig tree grows olives what is it? If your grapevine pumps out figs what is it? Now let me ask you, does an olive tree pump out 90% olives but the occasional fig? No. Grafting aside, a tree only produces one thing.

Or let me say it like this: What percentage of the fruit on God's fig tree would be figs?... 100% right? Now what about Satan's tree? What percentage would be figs?... Less than 100% right? But there would still be figs. That's what deception does. And remember Satan isn't creating anything new, he's just distorting what God has already spoken.

And this is why blowing up once or twice a month, or having a habit of cutting people down to make you look good isn't a small side issue, it's an identity issue. It's the sign of who your daddy is. God's fruit is pure, Satan's is everything else.

And so we prove God is our father when we speak words that build up and create life in the people around us, and our tongues prove we are illegitimate children when they are forked, when both praise and curses flow.

So friends, when it comes to your tongue, who's your daddy?

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In closing I want to address the question "what do I do if I recognize that there are olives growing on my fig tree because my tongue is forked?" You realize that your "*minor problem*" with words is actually symptomatic of a much bigger problem lying just below the surface, and you're wondering what to do now?

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There are two sides to the coin here. Throughout this letter James wants his readers, who primarily think of themselves as Christians, to question themselves. So this isn't about "is your niece actually a Christian, or does your grandfather have saving faith" James wants each of us to ask ourselves where does the evidence in my life point. Do I have faith that works? Are my actions, and in this case my words, consistent with what I say I believe?

If there was no danger that there would be people sitting in the pews of a church for their entire lives and not actually belonging to Christ James wouldn't say what he does here. So question yourself, am I for real? Is my love and devotion to Jesus such that I am trying to honour Him with every aspect of my life? If not then repent. If you haven't cared that your words are mixed, that your tongue is forked and causes death as well as life then your daddy isn't Jesus, you need to be saved.

But at this point all hope isn't lost, in fact it is found. From here if you repent and ask Jesus to make you into a new creation; if you ask Him to refine every aspect of your life like silver until He can see His reflection in you He will – this is His specialty. So that's the first person this text hits.

There is a second kind of person who is challenged by this text. You are a Christ follower. You do image your Father the Creator, but, you find yourself still struggling with your words. You connect with James when he says "we all stumble in many ways." But here's what's different: your desire is to honour Jesus – you want this more than anything else. And so while it is painful, you embrace the challenge to bring your tongue more in line with your Creator. You say "I'm going to own that. I'm going to do it."

If this is you then repent as well, call out to Jesus and tell Him that your words are inconsistent with your nature, and ask Him for a clean heart and a right spirit – that's where the change starts. Ask Him to keep refining you like silver because you aren't done yet. This is His specialty too – YHWH is the speaking Creator and the speaking Re-Creator, and He is in the business of extending mercy to broken people.

So brothers and sisters know this, your words matter. It is with your tongue that you prove who your daddy is.