

# **Book of James**

## **Sermon #6: Atomic Words**

**James 3:1-12**

**Dr. Matt Cassidy ---- September 25, 2022**

Good morning, Grace! I'm glad you could join us today. If you want you can join us—we're going through the Book of James in chapter 3. We're going to look at the first twelve verses. And today it's about power. We—each and every one of us—you and me—have remarkable power at our disposal. And James is going to use these verses to tell us to be afraid; to respect the power that we have and learn about the power and change our lives around that power. He's going to talk about the power of the tongue. He's talking about the power of words.

Here's a modern translation of our passage today. Let me just read it for you. He says, "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we all teach and we're all going to be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. And anyone who makes no mistakes when they're speaking is a perfect person, able to hold their whole body in check like a bridle.



“The tongue has power to direct the powerful. You could put an eight-year-old girl that weighs sixty-five pounds on a work horse that weighs as much as a car, and yet, with a bit and some reins, she can steer that horse in any direction that she wants to go. The power of the bit to direct is the power of the tongue.



“You could build a ship as big as our campus with rooms for thousands of people.”



“If that ship were to be tossed by storms, the captain would be able to redirect that huge ship by using a tiny rudder, compared to the size of the ship itself. And the power of that rudder to steer? The tongue has that kind of power.”



“So also the tongue is small. It’s a small part of our body, and yet it boasts of great things. The tongue has the power to destroy. A single match ... No matter how small, it has the power to enflame an entire forest.”



“And the flame will destroy everything that it touches. The tongue is also a fire, a world of evil among the parts of its body. It corrupts the whole body. It sets the whole course of one’s life on fire and is itself a fire from hell.



“The tongue is wilder than the wild beasts. Humans have trained lions to roar on cue and killer whales to jump through hoops. Not the tongue. No one can tame the tongue. It’s never been done. It’s relentlessly evil. It’s full of deadly poison. The tongue’s inconsistency is unnatural. It’s otherworldly. With our tongue we bless God our Father, and with the same tongue we curse every man and woman that’s made in His very image. Curses and blessings out of the same mouth.

“Friends, this cannot go on. A spring doesn’t gush forth fresh water one day and gulf water the next. An apple tree doesn’t bear strawberries, does it? Strawberry bushes don’t bear apples, do they? You’re going to dip into a polluted mudhole and think you’re going to bring up a clear cup of cold water? Really?

“The tongue will tell you the health of your soul.”

### **Words Have Power**

The theme is that words have power. And James uses illustration after illustration, word picture after word picture. He’s trying to paint for us the smallness of the tongue, words, and the robust influence they have on everything around us. If he were to write today, knowing what we know now, he would say that words are atomic. They’re uranium. It’s too hard to see but can power an entire city.



It can give millions of people light so that they can feel safe. It can power a hospital to bring healing to people. It can fuel up entertainment centers so that we might enjoy our life a little more. Uranium can do that. And in .1 second it can cause the heat of 500,000 degrees Fahrenheit and absolutely incinerate five square miles of that same city. That's nuclear power.



That's the power of the tongue. The Bible says, and we know from experience, that words have power over us. They have power for positive things. Words can be used to encourage and fortify and heal and teach and support. We use words to sing, we use words to pray and to praise God. But words have power to destroy, too; to corrupt, to pervert, to slander, to gossip, to complain. And James is saying that this letter he's writing is dedicated to the theme of dedicating us to become like Christ in all of life. And in these twelve verse James is saying, *You need to become like Christ in the words that we use.* The words—the tongue, he's talking about, is the greatest challenge and the greatest threat to us becoming like Christ.

He says in this passage that if you can tame your tongue, you've arrived. The favorite word that James uses for maturity—mature, complete, lacking in nothing—is the word “perfect.” He's going to say that here. You're perfect if you can do this right.

## James 3:1-2

**Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. <sup>2</sup> 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.**

Look what he says in the first two sentences: “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 to bridle his whole body.”

He’s not saying *Don’t become a teacher*; he’s just saying that words have power and you better fear that. You better be very careful, because that’s what you do for a living. It’s like saying, *I’m a teacher. I mean, I work with dynamite.*

*Well, you should be careful.*

*Well, I will.*

### Words Direct Our life and the Lives of Others

Words direct. Words are directing. They direct our lives and the lives of people that we touch, like a tiny bit directs a giant warhorse. That’s the power of words. Like a small rudder can maneuver a ship even during a storm—that’s the power of words.

And so, he says, “So also the tongue is small, yet it boasts of great things.” Because words steer us. Words define who we are and where we’re going. The words we use define who we are and where we’re going. They define who we are: we use evil words, we are known for being evil. If we use words that are complaining, we’ll malcontents. If we use sexually charged words, yeah, people think we’re kind of creepy. And rightly so.

If you’re known for lying with your words, then you’re not trusted. They define who we are. And he’s showing here that they literally direct and determine the course of our lives, because the words we use determine our reputation, our friendships, our career path, our very lives. The power of the tongue, the power of words, infect your marriage. You can make a

marriage sweet with the words you choose to use. Or you can use different words and turn that same marriage into something that's sour.

You bring words into your workplace and you can isolate yourself from your coworkers. It'll cost you. It'll change your career. Or you could use words to bring together and unify a team and maybe have them working in ways that maybe couldn't be done any other way and maybe take them to places they couldn't go if it weren't for the words of encouragement, words of insight, words of understanding. It's life and death. The power of words over people's lives--- words direct us and people around us. Words can change who you are and save lives. They could save your life.

There's a show on PBS called *Frontline*. I watched this show twenty years ago and I can't forget it. It haunts me. When I think of 9/11 in 2001, the Twin Towers ... when I think of that ... and the logo is "Never forget." One of my parts of never forgetting is this *Frontline* story that took place one year later in 2002 in October. And the title of this episode is "The Man Who Knew." It's a story of John O'Neill. And John O'Neill was a special agent with the FBI in charge of counterterrorism. He was actively involved in cases and even headed up cases in the context of the bombings that were going on in the Middle East that led to the Twin Towers falling and the attacks on the embassies in Africa, the USS Cole in Yemen, the buildings, and then the first attack on the World Trade Center.

John O'Neill said, *Listen, Osama bin Laden is the person we need to be watching. He knew early on. He said, We need to deal with him early before Al Qaeda gets too much momentum and brings it to our home again.* And he called it. He knew it. And no one was listening ... "The Man Who Knew."

And here's why. Because John did not play well with others. He just wore people down with his cantankerous vocabulary. His bravado and impatience tainted everything he said. No one wanted to work with him or even be in a room with him. And he was telling the truth, but no one could hear it.

And so, he ended up having to leave the FBI. He knew that Osama bin Laden wanted the scalp of the Twin Towers for his own, and he knew he was going to come back after it, and no one believed that. So, in his private life, he became chief of security of the World Trade Center. And he died on September 11, 2001, when the first tower collapsed.

When I saw that show in 2002 (it's literally taking my breath away again), I thought, *If he would have just chosen kind words. What if he would have been just a little bit nicer and not so angry and Irish and coming after people? What if he would've been pleasant to work with? He could have saved 3,000 lives.*

And what was harsh and hard for me to watch in this was that he reminded me of me and my stupid mouth always getting me in trouble. My stupid mouth ... I wonder what I'm doing to keep people from hearing the truth because of all the other words that I'm using. Ugh.

Words have the power to destroy. A single spark is all it takes. It's like a cow knocking over a tiny lantern in Chicago in the 1800's, starting a fire that lasted two days. Three miles of Chicago was burned to the ground. A hundred thousand people were homeless. Seventeen thousand buildings were destroyed. Three hundred people died in a fire that started with a cow knocking over a lantern.

And James is saying here that gossip and slander spread faster than a wildfire and do way more damage. Words have the power of life and death.

### **Why Do Words Have So Much Influence?**

And why is that? Why can words have so much influence in our lives, directing us where we'll be going and causing so much destruction or encouragement? And the answer is, because they have the power to alter a human soul. If the words are believed, the words can change the nature of a heart. What we say and what we hear, what we choose to believe in what we hear, metaphorically, that can color our souls.

Let me give you a story and an example. There was a gal that I enjoyed watching grow up. And she was so noble and courageous. She had this fortified self-image. She was imputed with all sorts of truth and love from her mother and father—two-and-a-half decades of fortified encouragement. She just lived a life that was strong and courageous with her shoulders back and her head held high. I always admired here.

And as a young lady she married a man, and the man was bitter. He was twisted with his anger. And over the years he brought that anger into the room. He was like a bullhorn of words of humiliation and degradation and embarrassment and misery. And it changed her. And when the day finally came when it became physical and he grabbed her and shook her, she was so not

who she was that she could believe that it wasn't that bad and she probably had it coming. And what's tragic in this is that that strong and confident young lady that I knew was gone. And what had changed her were words.

And James wants us to see and fear the power of words. They have the power to steer a person that once powerful and now made a weak; a person that had a golden soul that was open to other people has now become dark and closed and living safe and trying to just be a survivor.

Words have power. But they're just words. And why is that? Because words affect our souls if we believe those words. "Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me"—if you don't believe the names. If you believe the names, a bone will heal in six weeks. It will take a lifetime to undo the names that are changing the color of your soul.

And that's why James is saying that we need to understand this. There's a bigger picture here. There's a big idea that has broader application for us, and it has to do with the nature of man, anthropology, how we're made. Here are the values that we're supposed to weigh with. We have to see ourselves in other people. Not just as flesh, but we're supposed to see ourselves as souls first that are living in temporary housing called skin. And in the nature of those souls, words have power. And we have to take responsibility for the power of words that we hear and whether we're going to listen to them, and the power of the words that we say and speak to other people.

Let me say again in a different way. We're not bodies that happen to have souls; we're souls first that are eternal and everlasting. And we're just currently inhabiting this flesh that's going away. But our nature is spiritual. And in that spirit, know this to be true: that words have tremendous influence in guiding and directing, and so we have to be responsible for what we hear and whether we're going to believe it or not, and for what we say. We need to take responsibility for that.

### **Application #1: Be Careful What You Hear**

In the application of what we hear, we have to discern what is true. Since words have so much power, we acknowledge that. This passage is showing us that. It has this power over our souls. So therefore, we can't necessarily control what we hear, but we can determine what we listen to. And what we listen to and grab on to ... our mind serves like a gatekeeper. *Is that right,*

*real and true? Is that from the Bible? Is that the Lord? Or not? We're supposed to be hearing things ...*

When you go through your mail ... how many of you guys when you go through your mail are standing over a garbage can? Because that's what most of it is. And it says "Urgent." That means it's junk mail. That's a lie. And so, we're supposed to be doing that when we hear words. We need to see the evil that's coming our way, and we say, *We don't have to believe that.*

### **James 3:5-6**

**How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! <sup>6</sup> 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.**

And James is saying, because of the power of words and lies on our souls, that didn't just come from anywhere. He says that's coming from hell. Look what he says in verses 5 and 6. He's talking about the power of destruction. "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 a person's life, and set on fire by hell."

Those lies that we choose to believe are from hell. James says, *Will you just consider the source, please?*

### **Proverbs 16:27**

**A worthless man's words are a scorching fire.**

Look at what it says in Proverbs 16: "A worthless man's words are a scorching fire." James says, *Yeah, so don't listen to them. Don't believe in them. You might have to hear it, but you don't have to absorb it.*

Years ago, I was at a rehearsal dinner. I was officiating a wedding, so I was sitting with the bride and the groom. And the groom's father comes over and puts his hands on the shoulders

of his son and says, “I’ve been saying this for years. This guy’s never going to amount to anything. And I’m here to tell you I told you so.” Everyone at the table ... yeah.

And so, this young man who would be married the next day has a choice to make. He has three choices ahead of him. One, he could believe what his father just said. And then for the rest of his life, every time he starts approaching some expression of success, he hits the self-destruct button and he doesn’t even know why. But he somehow ruins whatever he had accomplished so he can prove that he will never amount to anything.

There’s another way to apply this. He could believe it and then run his entire life redline and do whatever it takes to succeed and climb that ladder to the top of the wall that’s leaning against the wrong wall. And he can achieve many great things and it will never be enough. But he will do that at the expense of his family, neglect or abuse, but *I’ll do whatever it takes because I’m going to prove that I can be a success.*

He can believe it, he can believe it ... or he can NOT believe it. He could say, *That’s from a worthless man.* You don’t even know this father, and how many of you think this guy’s a worthless man? Oh yeah. Because only a worthless man would do this and say this. He could consider the source. He could ask himself, *Is that right and real and true? What does the Bible, what does God the Father, the maker of heaven and earth, say about my value? I’ll live for that.*

Even at that table there were men that would spend two decades investing and making sure he gets reprogrammed appropriately. But he chose door number two. And he ran his family into ashes. He had a great amount of accomplishments. I’ll tell you, he was successful in that. And he left a scorched earth behind because he chose to believe what a worthless fool said to him. He didn’t appreciate the power of words, the power of their destruction.

### **Proverbs 12:18**

**Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.**

Words directed his life and they directed his family’s life and they set his family on fire. And the reason is because words affect your soul, but only if you choose to believe in them. And in Proverbs 12 it says, “Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.” And he didn’t understand the nature of reckless words here. What he could have been

doing, what we do is that we don't stand over a garbage can when our mind is filtering what we're hearing. We're standing over Gehenna, the gates of hell, and we're thinking, *These lies go right back to where they came from.* What you're hearing in your mind that isn't right and real and true, that isn't from the Bible, send it back to where it came from. Do you think this came from some neutral source? James says that kind of evil, words that influence your soul, directing your course of life—those words are satanic.

He says in verse 8, “The tongue is full of deadly poison.”

There's a cute little children's church song that has a bunch of verse to it, but this one applies. It says, “Be careful, little ears, what you hear. The Father up above is looking down in love, so be careful, little ears, what you hear.” James would agree with that. He'd say, *Look, you know, words have the potential to go straight to your soul and alter it. So you need to be discerning. You need to take responsibility for what you believe and what you hear.*

### **Application #2: Choose Your Words Carefully – Be Slow to Speak**

And then the second application for the power of words is that you need to choose your words with the grace of God. You need to choose your words with grace.

#### **Proverbs 12:18**

**Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.**

In Proverbs 12—there it is again—you can choose one or the other—“Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue will bring wise healing.” Don't be reckless with your words. Why don't you bring healing with your words instead?

James kind of already told us the application in chapter 1, if you were here, when he says, “Be slow to speak.” I mean, you don't have to answer right away. What if we all just lived our lives as if we had a terrible sore throat and we could only say things that were worth the pain. That would slow us down, wouldn't it?

But the point is that you don't have to send the e-mail tomorrow or the next day or the next month or ever. Whatever you do, don't send it now. You could save your career. Because

you can't un-ring a bell, as they say. And James would say that bell is connected directly to the soul and has the power of good and evil for the person who hears it ring.

**It takes a baby two years to learn how to talk and then fifty years to learn how to keep quiet.**

**--- J. Vernon McGee**

J. Vernon McGee is an old pastor famous for his preaching—he has this Southern charm. He says that it takes two years for a child to learn how to speak. It takes fifty years for a person to learn how to be quiet. I'd say closer to sixty at this point. That's just me.

And so, the application, especially for moms and dads, is that that's a fragile flame that you're directing. The words that you choose—choose them with the grace of God. And I'll add this: big brothers, big sisters, older brothers and sisters, you can't believe this, but just trust me, because you will later. But you can't at age six or twelve or sixteen, or maybe even twenty-five. But you have a bullhorn with your younger siblings. They look up to you and they magnify the words that you use. Use words of grace, healing, strength, encouragement. Build them up. There is no need or place for sarcasm. Watch where your younger brother or sister goes based on your words and where you directed them. There is power in words.

There's another verse to that kids' church song. "Be careful, little mouth, what you say. The Father up above is looking down in love, so be careful, little mouth, what you say."

We have to take responsibility for what we say. We take responsibility for what we hear.

And the third point that James is bringing to us is that you have to learn to tame your tongue. We have got to tame our tongue. It has to be harnessed. *It's not hard*, James says. *It's impossible*. James says that it's never been done. It's not even close. He says that we've tamed all the wild animals. We can tame eagles and lions and whales. We teach parakeets how to talk. If you go to Sea World there are seals that will do a skit for you where they rob a bank and stuff. I mean, we can tame all the wild animals, but then James swoops in and says, *But not the tongue*. *It's not like any of that*. *There's nothing like that*. And he literally says that no one can tame the tongue. In the Greek it means "no one." Not one.

## James 1:9-10

**With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. <sup>10</sup> From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.**

And the proof he uses for this is that he says to look how duplicitous our souls are. We can't say anything without saying the other thing. We cannot live consistent with the words we use. So, in verse 9 he says, "With our tongue 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."

Yeah, we live a hypocritical life with what we say.

So, watch how this outline works, okay? He says, Words have power. *They can affect and direct a soul.* And then he says, *Tame your tongue. But you can't tame your tongue—it's impossible.* You're not helping here, James. What he's doing is that he's backing us into this. No man can tame their tongue, but the Spirit of God can. The Spirit of God can move that bit and rein. He has the ability and the power to direct that horse, that beast. He's the captain that has the strength to steer that ship in the right direction. Taming the tongue—the solution is absolute dependence on the Spirit of God, because the problem is our soul. You see, the problem with our vocabulary isn't our words. Because if it was our words, it would just be a matter of discipline. It'd be another set of rules. It would be Confucius coming in and telling us seventeen ways not to use the wrong words. But that's not the problem. The problem is our soul.

Our mouth is a loudspeaker for the condition of our heart. So, you can't change your words unless you change the soul. And you can't change the soul. We can't! Only God's grace can. God's grace can transform a soul. It's the only thing that's ever advertised in the Bible with the capacity to do that kind of major alteration. What we say is evidence of the health of our spirit.

### **Application #3: Stop and Consider**

**By examining the tongue, physicians find out the diseases of the body; and philosophers, the diseases of the mind and heart.**

**--- Justin**

Look what Justin, one of the church fathers, says: “By examining the tongue, physicians find out the disease of the body; and philosophers [theologians] look at the tongue and see the diseases of the mind and heart.” It reveals what’s inside of us.

#### **Matthew 12:33-34**

**Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit ...<sup>34</sup> For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.**

Jesus says it like this in Matthew chapter 12: “Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit ... For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.

#### **James 3:11-12**

**Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?<sup>12</sup> My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.**

The tongue is merely a messenger delivering letters that were composed inside your heart. So that’s the problem. James puts it like this in the last two verses that we’re looking at: “Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?” No. “My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.”

The point is that if you want to change the water, you're going to have to change the spring. If you want to change the fruit, you're going to have to change the root. If you want to change the words, you're going to have to change the soul. We can't change the soul, but the Spirit of God can. He's backing us in and frustrating us into accepting that it's only by the grace of God that we can change.

And so, when we have an episode when we say something, a slip of the tongue, sarcasm or foolishness or something pitiful, we're supposed to stop and ponder. There's no such thing as a slip of the tongue. That's a bit of our soul peeking out and saying, *What is happening?* And at that moment we should stop and consider, *What does that say about my well-being?* And more particularly, *What does the Spirit of God need to do in that part of my life? Are there words of truth that are found in the Bible about a promise of God or attribute of God where I'm not like Christ in this part, and it's showing itself in the way I speak? God, change my heart! I'm envious; make me grateful. I'm angry all the time; make me joyful.*

You want to change your words? You've got to change your soul. To change your soul, you have to surrender to the Spirit of God. Just give Him keys to everything. Slips of the tongue are rooms that you've locked away and where you don't want the Spirit of God to involve himself. Words have power. Let Him in there to change you.

**Proverbs 18:21**

**Death and life are in the power of the tongue.**

Again, look what it says in chapter 18 of Proverbs: "Death and life are in the power of the tongue." Yes. That's what James says too. And he would say to choose life; choose words of encouragement. Choose words of blessing.

The battle for the righteousness of our tongue is lifelong. No one's finished with the battle. If we are, then we're perfect. The point is that's a life of losing. If we can do this one thing, we'd be perfect. We're not, so we need to acknowledge that it's going to be a life of losing.

Like Martin Luther said, "All of life is repentance." Right?

But there's another side of repentance. All of life is forgiveness. When's the last time you repented? That's the last time you experienced the forgiveness of God. If you stop repenting, you stop experiencing God's forgiveness.

And this topic—our mouth, our words—should make us regular repeat repenters, so that we might be regular repeat enjoyers of God's mercy and His forgiveness.

Let me close with four quick points from a Puritan pastor, Thomas Manton. He did a sermon on these twelve verses. I loved his four points, so I'm going to end with that. Here are the four things to walk away with as a consequence of knowing the power of words on our souls, taking responsibility for what we hear, what we say, and turning our lives over to complete surrender to the Spirit of God.

He says, therefore, that we should **rebuke others all the more tenderly** now that we see how soft and fragile the souls are. Handle them with care.

He says that we need to **depend on God's grace all the more earnestly**, because now we know that only grace transforms and the root problem is beyond our ability. And so, only grace and God's Spirit can do this. So, we need to be more earnest.

We need to **magnify the love of God all the more gratefully**. Be thankful, happy that we have a cure.

And then last, **walk all the more cautiously**. Because we have a sinning heart inside of us—not so much our spirit—that's been absolutely justified. But our souls are dark and full of poison. And we need to walk cautiously, because we know the power of words. And so, a theme in Proverbs is to guard your heart because it's the wellspring of your life. And in that, you'll be guarding your words, which have the power to direct your life and the lives of other people.

If we were a church filled with people that took on these applications and warnings from James chapter 3, we would be a perfect church. It'd be great to be part of a perfect church. Well, actually, they'd kick me out.

Anyway, let's pray to that end, that we would take these words seriously.

*Lord God, we are grateful for the forthright, straightforward communication of James here. But maybe we've come to a new understanding of the power of words in our lives. Lord, I'd ask that maybe your Spirit would unveil to us lies that we have believed, definitions that we have taken into our souls and thought them to be true, and they have guided us into ruin and wreck*

*because they are from hell, from Satan's mouth. And we believe them. Lord, we repent of that belief. They're not right and real and true. They're not found in the Bible.*

*So, Lord, I'd ask that You would help reprogram those thoughts, those tapes, those words; that You would be gracious, merciful, and patient with us.*

*Lord, I'd ask that You would help us bridle our tongues; to think, then to speak. Lord, I'd ask for Your mercy to invade our souls where we have not surrendered to You; that if we've held onto anger or bitterness or envy, whatever those things might be, that we would find these things out by the words that we use. Lord, Your Spirit needs to touch those, because only Your Spirit can change us. Only Your truth from the Bible, Your promises, Your character, can alter the depth of this evil. So, we ask that You would invade that. Permission granted.*

*Lord, we look forward to days—maybe two in a row—where we would speak honestly, truthfully, with love. And make us those types of people. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*