

Faith with Hands and Feet
Part 11: Watching our Words
James 3.1-12

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David Henderson

Would you join with me in reading these words out loud?

Shared Reading

We are the beloved of the Lord.
In love He created us.
In love He came to us.
In love He died for us.

In love He makes us His own –
folding us into His love
transforming us by His love
sending us out in His love

By our love this world will know that we are His –
by our love this world will see Him in us –
as He lives His life of love in us and through us,
to the glory of God.

Wendell Berry is a philosopher and poet who wrote a poem called *Manifesto*. The last line in that poem is:

Practice resurrection.

Don't just celebrate it. Live it.

We live a raised-from-the-dead-and-made-new sort of life, a turned-away-from-self-turned-up-toward-God-out-toward-others sort of life.

We've been walking through the book of James this spring, and you can't find a book in the New Testament that is more geared toward living the resurrection life.

This morning we come to one of the most practical and specific and noticeable ways that our new resurrection life, our new life of love, will show up day to day.

In our speech. In the words that come out of our mouths.

What small things our words are. A handful of sound waves and then they're gone. But what a deep and lasting impact those same small words can have. And how easy it is for those same small words to cause large amounts of hurt.

A bunch of years ago Sharon and I were in Cincinnati and we zipped into a grocery store to grab something. Some of you will remember this story. As we were waiting in the check-out line Sharon picked up a woman's magazine and looked at the woman on the cover.

I said, "Don't look at that, honey. You'll just get discouraged."

Sharon slowly turned her head and looked at me in shocked disbelief.

She wasn't the only one. The woman who was running the register stopped, looked over at me appalled, put her hand on her hip, and said, "Did you just say what I think you said?!"

"Wow, that really came out wrong!" I said.

"I'll say!" said Sharon.

"What I was trying to say is that woman isn't even real. They started with some normal person and then airbrushed her into some ridiculous and unattainable standard of beauty that doesn't even exist.

"And you look great, all the time! There isn't a thing about you I would want to improve upon. There's nothing to be gained by comparing yourself to some absurd, market-driven cultural standard that just feels like a burden."

That really is what I was trying to say, but that really is the way it came out of my mouth, and it really did cause some hurt that really did take awhile for us to work through.

Such little things, these words of ours, but what great hurt they can cause.

With that as a backdrop, would you take a moment and read these words from James?

James 1.26

Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.

Ouch! Wow! Those are some stark words.

James says:

Genuine faith has to be understood as something more than words we say to God. Genuine faith will show up in the words we say to others.

Someone should be able to draw a direct line between the faith we profess and the words we speak.

A life of faith is a life submitted to Jesus as King. A life of bowing before the Risen Jesus, and saying with Mary and Thomas, "My Master! My Prince! My Lord! My God!"

Not: I believe and I'm going to heaven but I believe and I submit to the king of heaven and I do everything in my power to live as a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. And that should have everything to do with what comes out of my mouth.

James makes it clear that *our words, though they are little, matter a whole lot to God, and they should matter a whole lot to us too.*

We love to excuse the words that come out of our mouths:

"I didn't mean anything by that. You know me. Sometimes I just talk without thinking."

Nope. We can't excuse our words nearly so lightly. God sure doesn't.

Listen to these incredibly probing words from Jesus.

Matthew 12:36-37

I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.

Even if we are among the redeemed, you and I will have to stand before God and answer for our sharp and insensitive and belittling and impatient and hurtful words.

In James 1.26 James says: *Using our mouths in a way that honors God and honors others requires constant vigilance.*

James talks about keeping a tight rein on our tongues. I asked Julie Williams what that means to her as a rider.

She said you keep a tight rein on a horse when you are worried that it will act up or you might lose control of it. Riding with tight reins means you don't trust your horse. Not a relaxed ride way to ride, she said, not like when you trust your horse and can give it free rein.

With that introduction to his views on faith and speech, flip now with me to James 3.1-12, where James comes back to the same theme and elaborates.

James 3.1-2

Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

I still remember vividly when someone in the congregation who upset by my teaching. He jabbed his finger at my chest and said, “You better not forget! You are going to be held to a higher standard!”

“Believe me,” I said, “I’m painfully aware of that. That’s probably the thing that gives me pause more than anything else in my ministry, knowing that every word that comes out of my mouth in a conversation or in a sermon has the potential to dishonor God and to mislead or harm the church.”

James goes on:

James 3.1-2

. . . We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.

We all stumble in many ways. Struggling with what comes out of our mouths is a universal human struggle.

Why? Controlling our *speech* is difficult because our mouths are the doorways to our hearts, and controlling our *hearts* is difficult.

As Jeremiah 17.9 says:

The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it?

We can’t trust the horse.

Then James says this:

Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.

This seems to say that it’s impossible for someone to control their tongue. Only a perfect person could do it, and which of us is perfect?!

But the Greek word that is translated “perfect” is the word *teleios*, which means something being the way God intends it to be. It can be translated mature, complete, or perfect.

So is controlling our tongues unattainable perfection or attainable maturity? Is his point that we can never control it? Of that *unless we reach maturity* we can never control it?

Clearly, based on what we’ve already read in chapter 1, though it requires a whole lot of work, James expects our faith to impact and control our speech.

I like the way the EHV translation captures this:

James 3.2 EHV

If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a fully mature man, able to bridle his whole body as well.

We can’t control our tongues perfectly, but we *can* control our tongues.

So how should we expect spiritual maturity to show up in our speech?

Before he answers that, James elaborates on why it is so difficult for us to control our tongues.

First James says our tongues have a disproportionate impact.

James 3.3-5

When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.

Our tongues are teeny. And yet they exert a disproportionate impact relative to their size. Think of how many turns in the course of human history come down to words that came from someone’s mouth.

You Purdue fans have seen the destructive potential of Zac Edey’s elbows. With his 7’ 7” wingspan, if you’re standing anywhere within four feet of him as he spins around with the ball in his hand after he grabs a rebound, you better watch out.

But that’s nothing compared to the destructive potential of one of our words, because our words can travel across a room, across a family, across a friendship circle, across a community, across a media platform, ripping and jabbing as they go.

Next James says our words aren't one-and-done.

The impact of our words spreads, it ripples out, one act of hurt breeding another and another.

James 3.5-6

Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

One unkind word lands in a vulnerable heart and it lodges there, and then it gets carried wherever that heart goes through life.

How many of you can remember something unkind that someone said to you as a kid? We all can.

Hurt breeds hurt. Unkind words breed more unkind words in return, harsh words thrown back in hurt, cutting words passed on to others in hurt, spreading like fire.

His third point: James reminds us our tongues are hard to tame.

James 3.7-8

All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

He's already reminded us that we all stumble in many ways when it comes to our speech. Now he reiterates that idea, insisting that no human being can tame the tongue.

Which doesn't mean it can't be tamed. It just means it can't be tamed *by us*. More on that as we come to the end of the message.

Now he swings back around to the point he made in chapter 1:

Fourth: James says that for followers of Christ, what comes out of our mouths matters. A lot! It matters to God, and it should matter to us.

James 3.9-10

With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.

Our words matter. This is serious stuff. A mouth that professes love for God but from which come unloving words toward others is a contradiction of purpose at the deepest level.

Because of that, James urges us to keep a tight rein on our tongues, to tame our tongues.

Here are some specific areas where the Bible talks about our speech, four things to keep a close rein on.

First, related to humor.

Before I became a Christian I was really sarcastic. Most of my humor was at someone else's expense. Someone was inevitably the butt of my joke.

In Ephesians 5.4 Paul says

There should be no obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving.

Did you ever wonder why I like puns and wordplay so much?

I wondered why the baseball kept getting bigger and bigger. Then it hit me.
I thought I forgot how to throw a boomerang. Then it came back to me.
I'm reading a book about anti-gravity. I can't put it down.
I stayed up all night to see what happened to the sun. Then it dawned on me.

I love wordplay because no one is the target of the humor. I was going to say no one gets hurt by puns but, based on how much some of you groan when I tell them, I'm guessing some of you would disagree.

Now that I am a follower of Christ I am ruthless about never using humor to communicate a message or give feedback, and never using humor that put someone down. I'd love to have you join me in that ruthless pursuit.

Second, related to hurts.

We feel hurt and what is our reflex? To hurt back. Someone says something unkind to us, and in turn we say something unkind to them, or something unkind about them to others.

No. We're called to break that cycle. In Colossians 3:8 Paul writes:

You must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.

Paul also cautions us in I Corinthians 13.5 against holding onto our hurts.

When we regularly go through a recital of others' offenses against us, that freshens the offense and brings it back into the present, which causes us to feel offended by them all over again.

Nope. Love keeps no record of wrongs, and it gives no room for bitterness to grow. If someone hurts us we are called to go straight to them, not letting the sun go down on our anger, forgiving them seven times seventy times, and then letting go of it and forgetting it.

Clara Barton, the founder of the Red Cross, was reminded one day of something unkind that someone had done to her years before. But she acted as if she had never even heard of it.

"Don't you remember that?" her friend asked.

"No," Clara said, "I distinctly remember forgetting it."

For Jesus, unforgiveness is as serious an offense as the sin that causes our hurt in the first place.

Third, related to differing opinions passionately held

I think as Christians we should radically rethink the impact of our words on social media.

In case you haven't noticed, words can cause division.

And in case you haven't noticed this either, social media platforms are places where the divisive and destructive power of our words is multiplied.

Our words accomplish less good on social media than we think they do.

Think how much of our time we spend trying to persuade people who have already made up their minds. Research done by Texas A&M scholar Michael Workman shows that if you already have an opinion, social media does not change your opinion. It merely strengthens your bias toward the opinion that you already have.

Our words on social media not only accomplish far less good than we like to imagine, and they can accomplish far more harm than we think. Multiple studies on social media have demonstrated the destructive impact of negative words on self concept, mental health, group unity, and a number of other factors.

Proverbs 6.16-19 says

There are six things the LORD hates,
seven that are detestable to him:

It lists them, and the last of them is:

. . . a person who stirs up conflict in the community.

Let that sink in. God *hates* a person who stirs up conflict in the community.

In our social media policy, we say this:

In our church family, we are committed to communicating in ways that are honoring to others and to God. We seek to communicate in a way that starts conversations, and continues friendships, not ends them. We believe there is no place for language that is belittling, combative, coarse or abrasive.

Fourth, related to just talking at all . . . filling air space with our words rather than letting the other person speak.

James 1.19 says

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry,

I recently read a short story – I can't remember which – that begins with two men standing and talking by a fireplace after a meal.

One notices the other is holding an index card in his hand.

“What is that?”

“Oh, my daughter gave it to me. She encouraged me to carry it around and have it in my hand whenever I'm talking with someone.”

He handed it to the other man. The card just said, “WAIT.”

“Wait?”

“W-A-I-T. It stands for “Why Am I Talking?”

In God's economy, our words are meant to be the means by which we love the other.

But how often our words become an expression of our own self-importance, or our insecurity, or a way of seeking approval or trying to impress, or a way of controlling a conversation and trying to take charge of it, or a way of complaining and putting others down.

Especially for those of us who make our living with words, we need to be careful not to fall into the habit of shifting the conversation over to us, and expecting others to listen while we speak.

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Putdown humor, harbored past hurts, deeply held convictions shared in destructive ways, talk driven by self-importance: those are all things we need to guard against carefully as Christians, seeking to rein them in.

I still remember when Budelia, our rascally dog, would see an open door and make a sudden dash for it, and we'd have to grab at whatever part of her we could reach to keep her from escaping.

Our words are like that, and require constant vigilance.

Our vigilant watch is a filtering system that tries to catch what's in the pipes and keep it from coming out of the faucet.



Not long after we moved here, because we were the first street served by a pump that pulled water up out of a muddy well whenever water reserves got low, our pipes were filled with mud.

It fouled up the whole house. So we got a whole system filter, and in a pretty short amount of time it completely clogged up that filter. Then we shifted to a different replaceable filtering system, and we had to change the filter every month or two. But even that was only partially effective. It still let stuff through.

Finally, the city built a new water processing plant, and provided us with clean water from a different source. We never had the issue again. Now we don't have a filter in our house at all.

What does the water at your source look like?

Which brings us to the final section of the passage. I know we've already covered a lot of territory, but there's one more absolutely crucial part to all this. Stay with me here.

Listen to what James says in the closing verses of this passage.

James 3.11-12

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

Up to this point we've been talking about carefully filtering our words, standing vigilant guard over our mouths, keeping a tight rein on our tongues, trying to prevent the wrong words from coming out.

But James tells us that filtering our words will never be adequate. Trying to stand watch over the gate of our words, if that's all we're doing, will never work.

If this is what your water looks like at the source . . .



. . . it doesn't matter how much you try to filter at the faucet. It's still going to come out polluted.

But if this is what the water looks like at the source,



. . . you don't have to worry about what comes out at the faucet. Clean at the source, clean at the tap.

In Matthew 12.34-35, Jesus says:

The mouth speaks what the heart is full of. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.

The mouth speaks what the heart is full of. Change the heart, and then open your mouth and say whatever you want. The key to transformed speech is not a better filtering system, it is a changed heart.

So how, really, does a heart change? What takes the source water from polluted to clear? How does our heart actually change?

God changes the heart from the inside

through our active cooperation and participation

and that comes about through our daily and even hourly conversations with God and invitations to God

each day, all day, seeking God and involving God in our lives and our feelings and our decisions and our conversations.

This is how the water at the source is transformed. When each day, all day:

We **worship** God, honoring him and placing him first in our lives.

We **submit** to God, inviting his rule over every part of our lives.

We **relinquish** our lives to God, asking him to have his way.

We **offer** our lives to God, asking him to lead us at the start of each day.

We **examine** our lives before God, looking back over each and asking for God to see Him.

We **place** ourselves in scripture and devotional classics to **open** our hearts up to God and **invite** our ongoing conversation with him.

We **rest** in God's loving and transforming presence.

We **ask** God to forgive us and to forgive those who've wronged us, asking God to make us more like Jesus.

We **invite** God to help us see his image in our neighbor and in our brother and sister, and to love them with his love.

We **ask** God to give us his eyes for those we see each day, and his ears for their concerns, and to make us his instrument in their lives.

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When that's how we live, our hearts will begin to change.

And the more we live that way, the faster our hearts will change.

And as our hearts are changed, more and more, *this* is what we'll find coming out:

Our words will be **loving**. We'll use our words to honor the other person and put the other person ahead of ourselves.

Ephesians 4:15

Speaking the truth *in love*, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.

Our words will be gracious. Our words will be generous, giving the other person what they don't have and haven't deserved.

Colossians 4:6

Let your speech always be *gracious*, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

And our words will be edifying, building up the other person and encouraging them with our words.

Ephesians 4:29

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for *building others up* according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

By this the world will know you are my disciples, Jesus says. If you *love*.

And this is the primary way that the world will know that you love. By the words that come out of your heart.

Change the heart, then let the mouth say what it wants.

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St Patrick's Breastplate Prayer

*Christ with me,
 Christ before me,
 Christ behind me,
 Christ in me,
 Christ beneath me,
 Christ above me,
 Christ on my right,
 Christ on my left,
 Christ when I lie down,
 Christ when I sit down,
 Christ when I arise,
 Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
 Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
 Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.*