

*Copyright July 1, 2018. All Rights Reserved. Geist Christian Church*

**Title:** Faith Works: Speaks

**Date:** July 1, 2018

**Preaching:** Ryan Hazen, Senior Associate Minister

**Scripture:** [Matthew 12:32-37](#)

**Text:** [James 1:26; 3:1-12](#)

**E-mail:** [Ryan Hazen](#)



Today, we find ourselves in the midst of a sermon series on the book of James. Pastor Randy began this series four weeks ago and I would invite you, if you've missed any or all of the previous three sermons, to go back and catch up. You'll find them on the church website.

James is called a "general" Epistle because it isn't sent to a specific church like Corinth or Rome. Rather it is written to the Jewish Christian community at large. Over the last few decades, scholars have come to believe that James was written by the James that is the brother of Jesus. Paul recognizes him, along with Peter and John as the three pillars of the early church. It makes it an interesting book to study.

Some say that James contradicts the doctrine that says that by faith alone we are saved. Martin Luther even called it a "straw epistle," believing that James says you get right with God by your good works. What we've seen in these three weeks is that this isn't the reason that James wrote this letter. Rather, he writes words of instructions on how to live our lives as Christians. It is why the title of the sermon series is "Faith Works." It is a play on words. Faith works in the sense that faith acts. Faith must be put into action.<sup>1</sup>

When I saw that the fourth sermon in this series would be about the words coming out of our mouth, I was eager to see how Randy would deal with it in our current political and cultural climate. Then, I realized that Randy would be gone on the fourth Sunday of the series. I asked if we were going to skip a week in the series. He said, "No, I assumed you would take that week." And, here we are.

It is precisely because of our current political and cultural climate that I feel like I need to preface what I am about to say. Preachers are used to being misunderstood. I can stand at the back of the sanctuary and there will be four people in a row come out each with a comment. The first might say,

"You really gave it to the Democrats this morning." The next might say, "I loved how you indicted the Republicans." The next might say, "I only wish the people that needed this sermon were here this morning." The last will say, "I can't wait for this sermon to be on the website, my sister really needs to hear it." While most of the time, I'm happy for you to think that you might know someone that the sermon could help, that's not the case this morning.

This morning, I am preaching this sermon with you in mind. I am not indicting Republicans or Democrats or your sister or the people who aren't here. I'm preaching this sermon to you. I wrote this sermon with you in mind – no one else, no politician, no relative, just you. If you project it to someone else, you haven't heard me correctly. This sermon is for you and you alone. Don't try to make it about anyone else, please. (My wife read the sermon draft and reminded me it's also about me – she's helpful like that).

The issue throughout the book of James is how you demonstrate to others the claim that you are right before God. James is not talking about works as a means to salvation, but as a proof of faith. It is why he said in last week's scripture, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters if you say you have faith but do not have works?" (James 2:14) Our focus today is how speech is a major piece of how your faith works in the book of James.

Although instruction regarding speech is present elsewhere in the New Testament, it is ever-present in the letter of James. Were one to go through the letter line-by-line, one would discover that matters of speech permeate the epistle start to finish. In fact, some 46 of the letter's 108 verses – about 43% of them touch upon speech in one way or another. Said another way, two out of every five verses have something to do with speech.<sup>2</sup> It's a big deal for James.

The power of speech is one of the greatest powers God has given us but that power can be used for good or for evil. With the tongue, we can praise God and share the good news of Jesus Christ. But with that same tongue, we can tell lies that can ruin a reputation or break someone's heart. The ability to articulate truth is one of the most powerful ways we influence others, and yet so often we take this ability for granted. In order to impress on us the importance of controlled speech, and the consequences of our words, James gave us six pictures of the tongue: the bit in the mouth of a horse, a rudder of a ship, fire, a poisonous animal, a water spring, and a fig tree. You can put these six pictures into three meaningful categories that then reveal the three powers of the tongue. It is helpful for me that all three start with the letter "D."<sup>3</sup>

The first is the power to **DIRECT**. Both the bit in the mouth of a horse and the rudder behind a mighty ship are relatively small in comparison to the animal or the vessel. And yet, the bit and the rudder can take complete control over the horse or the ship. I grew up on a small farm. We were not really farmers because it was only 20 acres and we rented out the cropland for someone else to farm. We did, however, have a few animals that we kept – one cow, two barn cats (actually that number seemed to fluctuate wildly), one dog, and one horse. The horse was amazing in how he would act wild about 90% of the time but when the bit went in his mouth, he was able to be around children and was the tamest, most sedate horse you would ever see.

The tongue is a small member of the body, and yet it has the power to accomplish great things. Both the bit and the rudder must overcome contrary forces. The bit must overcome the wild nature of the horse, and the rudder must fight the winds and currents that would drive the ship off its course. The human tongue also must overcome contrary forces. This means that both the bit and the rudder must be under the control of a strong mind and heart. No wonder David prayed in Psalm 141, "*Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips.*"

The bit and the rudder have the power to direct which means they *affect the lives of others*. A runaway horse or a ship off course can mean the difference between life and death. The words we speak impact the lives of others. Never underestimate the guidance you give – to your own life and to others - by the words you speak or do not speak. So, the power to direct: the bit and the rudder.

The second picture of the tongue in this third chapter is the power of the tongue to **DESTROY**. James makes it real by painting this power as a fire and as a poisonous animal.

Earlier this month, I closely followed a fire in the western United States called the Ute Park Fire because of its location in and near the Philmont Scout Reservation, the place where I hiked with our Boy Scout Troop while on sabbatical three years ago. The fire was first reported about 2:00pm on May 31 with a coverage of about 150 acres. By that evening, it had grown to 4,500 acres. By the next morning, it was 8,000 acres and by the next morning, it was at 27,290 acres. Thankfully, on June 19, it was declared 100% contained.<sup>4</sup> Most untended fires start small but are quickly out of control.

Our words can start fires just as terrifying. Proverbs says, "*Without wood, a fire goes out; without gossip, a quarrel dies down. As charcoal to embers*

*and as wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife.*" (Prov. 26:20-21). Another Proverb says this, *"A man of knowledge uses words with restraint, and a man of understanding is even-tempered."* (Proverbs 17:27)

Words said too soon or out of anger or without thought can lead to burning words that later we will regret. Fire not only starts small and grows and creates heat; it also defiles. There was recently a fire in our neighborhood and while it was confined to the garage, the smoke damage so soiled the house that it was unlivable. Fiery words can defile a home, a church, anyplace where there are relationships.

Fire burns and hurts, and our words can burn and hurt. It is good that there wasn't Facebook or Twitter when Jesus was around. His enemies were harsh to him. Social media tends to let us think we are anonymous and allows us to hide our hateful rhetoric behind a screen. I can only imagine what we would have said about Jesus if we were critiquing him on social media today. Remember the time when he graciously accepted invitations to dine with people the Pharisees did not like and they called Him a *"glutton and a drunkard?"* When He performed miracles, they said Jesus was in league with Satan. Even when He was dying on the cross, His enemies could not let Him alone but threw vicious taunts into His face.

Fire spreads, and the more fuel you give it, the faster and farther it will spread. The tongue *"...sets the whole course of his life on fire..."* (James 3:6) James suggests that all of life is connected, and we cannot separate the words that come from our mouths with the people we profess to be. Our words have the power to destroy and it doesn't take but a spark to ignite a fire that is next to impossible to extinguish.

Not only is the tongue like a fire, but it is also like a dangerous animal. Some animals are poisonous, and some tongues spread poison. The deceptive thing about poison is that it works secretly and slowly and then kills. How many times has some malicious person injected a bit of poison into your conversation and you didn't notice initially? James reminds us that animals can be tamed; and, for that matter, fire can be tamed. When you tame an animal, you get a worker instead of a destroyer. When you control fire, you generate power. If God lights the fire and controls it, then the tongue can be a mighty tool for the glory of God and the building up of the church. Show me the language of a person and I have a window into their soul.

So, the power to direct: the bit and the rudder and the power to destroy: the fire and the animal.

The third is the power to **DELIGHT**. In hot countries like Palestine, the natural spring provides beautiful cool refreshing water people need to stay alive. Water is life-giving, and our words can give life too. Again from Proverbs, "*The words of a man's mouth are deep waters, and the fountain of wisdom is a bubbling brook.*" (Proverbs 18:4) The tongue is also delightful because it is like a tree. In Bible lands, trees are vitally important to the economy – fig trees, olive trees. They help to hold down the soil; they provide beauty and shade, and they bear fruit. Our words can help to shelter and encourage and can help to feed a hungry soul.

Many of you know that last weekend, I attended my 40<sup>th</sup> high school class reunion in Ottawa, Kansas. It was a wonderful event and it was so good to see old friends except I couldn't believe how many old people were there! I had one conversation that has resonated with me all week and I share it not to boast but to indicate the power of words to delight and build up. Duane Jones came up to me at Friday night's meet and greet session. Duane and I haven't seen nor talked since high school. He now lives in Eugene, Oregon and made the trip for the reunion.

He pulled me aside and told me about the time in junior high when he was very ill for an extended period of time. He missed a significant amount of school. He teared up when he told me of a card that I made and gave to him upon his return to school and how much that meant to him. The card apparently was a simple hand-made card saying that we had missed him in class and was glad he was feeling better. I have no memory of that and it is entirely likely that I mentioned something to my mom about Duane returning to school and she would have put supplies in front of me and told me to make said card.

The point is that more than 40 years after the fact, words said on a card at a time of trouble in his life had an impact. Words - forgettable for one can be impactful for another. Some of you have heard me or Randy talk about a "stay in ministry file." Ministers struggle with burnout at various times throughout their careers. We encourage new ministers to keep all of the notes, emails, and cards that come with words of appreciation and thanksgiving for something they have done in ministry. That file – the "stay in ministry file" - will be needed when things are tough, when people say things in haste and anger, say things that degrade and tear down.

I still have a card on my bulletin board in my office that was given to me by Quinn Nagy, a young man in our congregation, at the time of my mother's death a year and a half ago. Quinn would have been seven at the time. It's a Star Wars card and on the inside, he simply wrote, "I'm sorry for your

mom." Perhaps the best part of the card is that on the envelope he wrote that it was delivered via "monster mail." Like words to Duane that I wrote, Quinn likely doesn't remember the words he spoke to me but I hold them close even today.

Our words have the power to direct, the power to destroy and the power to delight. I don't think any of us would deny that we have problems with our tongues. Some of us struggle more than others, but each of us needs to find a way to tame the tongue. Let me give you five quick steps that James gives to us.

**1. From James 1:19 - Be quick to listen and slow to speak**

*"You must understand this, my beloved, let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger." Or, as Abraham Lincoln paraphrased James, "It is better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt."*

**2. From James 1:26 - Bite your tongue more often**

*"If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless."*

**3. From James 4:11 and 5:9 - Refuse to tear other people down**

*"Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another... Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged."*

**4. From James 5:12 - Speak only what is true**

*"Above all, my brothers, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No" be no, or you will be condemned."*

**5. From James 3:8 - Surrender your tongue to God**

*"...but no person can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison."*

We cannot tame our tongues without God's help. To help you surrender your tongue to God, let me encourage you with a little speech therapy. Will you listen more, bite your tongue more, refuse to tear others down, speak only what is true and surrender your tongue to God? This is not some extra thing that God is requesting of us. This is a mandate for being a Christ-follower. Yes, the tongue may be among the smallest parts of the body but it is, without a doubt, the largest troublemaker in all the world. It has the power to direct, the power to destroy, but also the power to delight. Give God control of your words each day and ask God to use you to be a blessing to others. It is the way our faith works.

---

<sup>1</sup> Introductory material on James from previous sermons in the Faith Works series by Randy Spleth, Geist Christian Church, June 10, 17 & 24, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> James statistics from Taming the Tongue by Todd D. Still in The Letter of James, page 30

<sup>3</sup> Idea of Direct, Destroy and Delight from book James: Be Mature, Scripture Press, 1988 and sermon from Community Church of Virginia Water, UK.

<sup>4</sup> Information on Ute Park Fire from Philmont Scout Reservation at [www.philmontscout ranch.org](http://www.philmontscout ranch.org).