

# A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

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## “Word Watching”

*The third in a series entitled, The Work We Do*

**James 3: 1-12**

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In case you've just joined us this month... we've been in a series I'm calling, The Work We Do. In our first two sermons... or as Hollywood likes to put it, “**previously on DaySpring...**” with James as our guide, we've talked about two paths...

The first was the moral path... it's the beginning. You can't get very far in the spiritual life without a willingness to be obedient and obedient to Christ. This is the “WWJD” stage.

What would Jesus do? Do it!

And this obedience takes you someplace... It's not that we're working to try and placate a Tyrant in the Sky. We're working because we want to grow up... and, as James says, “**This is the law that leads to freedom.**”

We get on the moral path because we want to be free. Remember the principle? If you want to be free, you have to be submissive.

And then last week we talked about people becoming the path. Your life, and especially your life in community, provides you with what you need to grow... usually in the form of someone that you are called to love but don't particularly like.

That's the second principle... Remember??? The work we need to do will be prompted by those who come into our life and IF (AND THAT'S A BIG IF) we're awake, we'll begin to see things about ourselves we must come to see.

James is our teacher again this week... and in the third chapter he writes...

*Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.*

*If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.*

*So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. (Don't you wish he wouldn't beat around the bush so?)*

*For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish, Waco, water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine yield fresh.*

James implies another universal spiritual principle for us... Ready... got your pens ready??? Because this is always true.

It's always true that to be free we must submit.

It's always true that what we need for growth will find us.

And... it's always true that... What is unseen controls what is seen. And let me say it a few other ways... What is fine, controls what is dense. What is subtle, controls what is coarse. Mind is over matter. Spirit is over flesh. What is uncreated controls what is created. What is seen controls what is unseen.

Are you getting it... sensing this principle?

Gravity controls the tides...

The wind... a ship...

And it's not just about what seems on the surface to be most powerful... To use James' illustrations...

The rudder controls the ship...

But... the hand controls the rudder!

But... it's the mind that controls the hand!

But... you know what? It's the heart, and it's the dream of a distant land, that controls the mind... The longing to journey, which is within you.

The tongue, James says, is small. It's just a little bitty thing... but not easily controlled... It's little but can cause some huge problems. But (and this is the flip side), it can also lead us, small and hidden as it is, to some huge gains in the spiritual life.

In part, because the tongue has a way of telegraphing who we are... remember the principle... what is unseen controls what is seen. And the tongue, as powerful as it is... is seen. So, it's being control-set by what is unseen, and if we listen long enough and honestly enough, we'll know by what. The tongue will testify.

And what will we hear?

Nervous chatter... revealing a fear inside?

Gossip... flowing from us because we feel small?

Opinion after opinion... because we have to control?

Our tongue will telegraph what's going on inside...

If we aren't compassionate, we're likely to be insensitive with our words, right?

If we aren't at peace... our words will be sharp and angry.

If we're paranoid... the words will be defensive.

If the thoughts are impure... dirty words will tell, eventually.

It's always true... that's why James points out the incongruity of folks who sing praises on Sunday but gossip around the coffee pot on Monday.

On Sunday, they're saying, "**The peace of Christ be with you.**" And on Monday they're dressing down an employee.

"**Something's up,**" James would say. And we can finish the thought... "**And the tongue is telling us about it.**" And as embarrassing as it is... and can be... it's good. Because if we're paying attention... if we're trying to grow up... now we know (and we know in some very specific ways) something about *the work we must do* as individuals.

If you can slow down...

If you are willing...

You can let your failures...

even your sins, guide you to God.

Richard Foster says that the tongue is a thermometer... It takes our spiritual temperature. But he says, and this is where the work really takes off, it's also a thermostat... controlling our spiritual temperature.

Remember the principle... a small little device on the wall, controls how your entire house feels. And, a small little organ in your mouth can influence your spiritual health... if you're willing to work.

See... there's no spiritual lotto. You don't just scratch off the sinner's prayer at the back of the track and cash in on transformation. We must work... We can't just be Christian in theory... we must practice. We must order our lives, and we must work to order our words.

There's a reason they practice silence in the monasteries. Those who know, who have gone deep and far, know that there's little progress with words out of control.

So... I want to invite you into a kind of personal monastery, your own inward monastic work. And I want to be very practical and invite us all to some verbal disciplines. I want you to see this as a kind of experiment in the spiritual life.

Ready... I've got points... how 'bout that? We'll call this WORD WATCHING... sort of like Bird Watching. You know, there are all sorts of birds all around us all the time... and most of us don't pay much attention. Words, too, are everywhere all the time and we don't pay attention. So... let's all do some word watching.

First of all... watch your words in reaction. Catch them and stop them... nip them (as Barney would say). Only say what you know you're saying. So... it's going to mean being silent while you're feeling insecure... or threatened... or angry. Would you just put a Post-It note in your mind about that? **“Note to self... when you feel something intensely... shut your mouth at least for the moment.”**

Watching your words in reaction would mean nothing gets said under your breath in a committee meeting... or in sarcasm to you spouse... or shouted out loud when someone cuts you off in traffic. (And by the way, hand signals aren't a technical-out on this one...) No words... or signs... in reaction.

Remember we're trying to be free, and this work will help set us free. Let the words go and perhaps you'll let the reactions go... Are you sure it's time to offer your opinion... or are you just reacting to a colleague with some compulsion to get a word in?

If you are tempted to control someone with your words... say a son in college who just got his eyebrow pierced... watch your words. Don't try to use them to control and perhaps your reaction to control will go away.

Be careful with chatter. Is your chatter just a reaction maybe? Mine often is... to anxiety... Watch those words that reflect an anxious reaction and see if the anxiety doesn't dissipate.

Second... Watch your words about others... again, remember, we're working spiritually... This is the work we do.

Try not speaking ill of anyone... Just give it a try. It begins in not passing judgment, but it also includes not passing on information. You know... where you talk about someone about whom you are “concerned.” And then you say, **“bless their heart,”** and think that's gotten you off the gossip hook but it hasn't. **“She's having problems with her kids, bless her heart.”**

And no gossip disguised as a prayer request either. That's the oldest trick in the book. **“We need to be much in prayer for him... he can't seem to get along at work.”** Whispering doesn't make it okay, either.

Watch carefully when you are saying anything about anyone. Letting people in on the fact that you are “in the know” is about your ego and your need to be special.

Just stop... don't justify it. Stop lying to yourself... rarely does it need to be said... Just be quiet.

No more words of judgment and critique. Stop critiquing and perhaps the critiquing, comparing spirit will leave you.

Third, watch your words about yourself. Stop yourself before you start in on your verbal resume. ... ever do that? Been here to school... studied there... Worked here... Got promoted there.

Lots of us don't do that about ourselves, by the way... but we're quick to do it about our kids. Again, that's no technical-out. **"My kid's on the honor roll,"** is still self-promotion. So, by the way, is, **"Our church is really growing. Yep, had to bring in extra chairs Sunday."** Watch those words.

And don't just be aware of all of your self-promoting words but your words that are... self-critiquing, self-defending, self-justifying, self-explaining. Uh huh... this is about to get very hard... that's exactly right.

**"Are you saying, don't defend ourselves... don't explain ourselves?"** Perhaps...

Think about what you're doing... and how untrusting of God it is... and how controlling it is. **"I've got to make sure you think properly of me."** See, I'm so afraid of what you might think of me, and I'm so attached to it, that I have to fix what you're thinking with my words...

I've got to offer my opinion, my perspective, so you'll know how bright I am... or right I am... or good I am, really. I've got to get in my two self-defensive cents.

Disciplining the tongue is one of the best ways to overcome our addiction to people. Richard Foster (who has a great chapter on this in Celebration of Discipline) says that silence makes us feel helpless. **"Silence is intimately related to trust."** (p 88)

There's a story that comes out of the desert tradition... where a monk was being spoken unfairly about by his brothers... Rumors... false and cruel rumors were spreading, so the monk went to the abbot wanting him to fix it.

And the Abbot took the monk over to look out a window where a dog was biting and tearing up a rug and the monk said, **"That is what the Lord is doing to your reputation. But if you will trust God you will not need to worry about the opinions of others."** (Foster, p 89)

Watch your words about yourself... trust yourself into God and trust others into God's care. If you intentionally, mindfully stop expressing your deep insecurity with words... perhaps your insecurity will vanish.

Word Watching is the kind of work we must do. And if we do... in time as we mature, we'll know better *when* and *how* to use our words. As the author of Ecclesiastes (3:7) says, **"There is a time to keep silent and a time to speak."** We want to speak when it's time and shut-up when it's time... as we mature, we can.

For now, discipline the tongue.

Let that still your heart...

Be quiet... Be still... Be changed.

Amen