CRAIG: Good morning.

CONGREGATION: Good morning.

CRAIG: Welcome to Mission Hills. We’re gonna start off a little bit differently this morning. We’re gonna start off with math. All right. Here’s what I want you to do. I want you to imagine that every word that you ever say gets written down, okay? So all the words you say to other people, all the words you say about other people when those people are not present, all the words. Now the average person uses 15,000 words a day. I don’t know who studies this, but it’s been studied, okay? So the average person 15,000 words a day. That’s about 30 pages of writing, okay? Now the average book, let’s go with 200 pages. That means the average person produces a book worth of words every 6.7 days. That’s 55 books a year. Which means that if you start talking regularly at about 2, by the time you hit age 12, you’ve written 550 books. If you’re 20, it’s 1100 books. Forty, 2200 books worth of words. If you make it to 79, the average lifespan of a US citizen, you will have written 4,325 books worth of words. The average high school library has about 1800 books, which means that in your lifetime you will produce more than two libraries worth of books.

Now what I want you to imagine is that if somebody were to go into that library and do research, what would they find out about you? Kind of a sobering thought, isn’t it? But we’re gonna see in what James has to say to us this morning is that what our words do is more than just reveal who we are. Our words actually have a surprisingly powerful impact on who we become. So I’d love to have you join with me in James Chapter 3. So grab your Bible. If you don’t have one, grab one from the seats in front of you, that’s our gift to you. We’re gonna be picking up our study in the book of James Chapter 3, where James starts off by saying something that causes a lot of people to tune out because they think it doesn’t apply to them. He says this, he says, “Not many of you should become teachers my fellow believers because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.” And a lot of people go, “Oh, okay. So he’s talking to Christian teachers: pastors, elders, but he’s not really talking to me. And that would be a mistake because he’s not talking in this passage just about, or even primarily to teachers. He mentions teachers primarily because they’re an easy way to kind of orient us to the topic, which is those are people that you know whose words have power, but he was gonna go on to say is, it’s not just teachers whose words have power, everyone’s words have tremendous power. And so you can’t write off what he says because it only applies to teachers, that’s not who he’s talking to and it’s not who he’s talking about. He says in verse 2, he says, “We all stumble in many ways.” You notice he’s not talking to teachers anymore, he says, “we all”. “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.” He says, “We all stumble,” meaning we all sin. We all fall short of the glory of God. We all mess up in lots of different ways. That’s everybody. And then he goes on and he says, “You know what? If you’re the kind of person who never stumbles...” I mean the NIV says, “Who’s never at fault,” with the literal Greek is, “Who never stumble.” He says, “We all stumble in many ways, but whoever never stumbles in what they say, is perfect.”

So, if you’re here today, and your tongue never gets you in trouble, if you never say anything that comes out wrong or causes damage, if you never have anything to say then congratulations, you’ve arrived. You’re done. He says, “You’ve made it. You’ve crossed the finish line. You’re perfect. You’re everything God wants you to be.” If you’re the kind of person who never stumbles in
what you say, then you will never stumble in any way, which kind of sounds like Dr. Seuss. If you understand what he’s saying, he’s saying, “Anyone who has learned to control their tongue completely has learned to control themselves completely.” And if your response to that is, “Okay, but who does that?” Then you get it. Nobody does that. Nobody’s there.

But what James is doing at this point is he’s speaking two very important truths that we need to understand about the tongue. The first one is just this: it’s that the tongue is often the last part of us to be sanctified. The tongue is often the last part of us to be sanctified. And if you don’t know the word sanctified, it’s kind of a Christian word, but it’s a useful term because you can hang a very big idea on one simple word. Sanctified means the process of becoming like Jesus. That’s what it means to be sanctified. It’s this work that God begins in your life when you come to Him by faith. Jesus comes to us and he receives us in spite of our sin. We don’t have to make ourselves perfect for him to come into our lives. He receives us in spite of our sin. He receives us just as we are, but he never leaves us just as we are, okay? There is an important truth there. Receives us just as we are, never leaves us just as we are. He begins to work in us and to transform us. To move us from the inside out until we become more and more like him. That’s the process that he’s involved in, and what James is saying, is that process often comes to touch our tongues last.

Our tongues are often the last part of us to experience that. And I don’t know why that’s true, but I can certainly speak from experience that it is true. I mean I find myself, in spite of the fact that I’ve walked with Jesus for 30 years now, I still find myself saying things, especially when I’m angry or frustrated, that I really wish I hadn’t said. Sometimes even I say things that as I’m saying them, I find myself thinking, “I don’t even mean that. Why am I saying that?” Anybody else? Please.

Congregation: Yeah.

Craig: Okay. Yeah. The tongue is often the last part of us to experience this transformation process. And that’s bad news in some ways, but there’s a good side to it. There’s another truth that James is sort of orienting us to here and it’s this, it’s that one of the great overlooked keys to Christian growth is speech therapy. One of the great keys to Christian growth, it’s often overlooked, is speech therapy. And of course, when I say speech therapy, I’m not talking about learning how to speak more clearly, I’m talking about learning how to speak more Christly, in a more Christlike way. But what James is saying is that when we begin to learn to control our tongues, it has a ripple effect into the rest of our lives. That if we could just learn to control our tongue, we would see that other habits of godliness would begin to be produced in our lives. What he’s really talking about here is something we call “keystone habit”, okay?

A keystone habit is a single habit that naturally leads to other desired habits. It’s a single habit that naturally leads to other desired habits. And I’ll give you an example that’s not spiritual but I have discovered for me, and I think for most people this is true, is that if I get a good night’s sleep, lots of other things fall into place. See, when I get a good night’s sleep, I wake up early feeling refreshed. And because I’m waking up early feeling refreshed, I go for a run, I exercise. And when I exercise, when I come back, I’m feeling kind of healthy. So I don’t deep fry a pop-tart for breakfast. I grab an apple, okay? So I eat healthy now. And because I’m eating healthy, I feel sort of energized and healthier throughout the day, and so I’m a lot more productive. And all those are habits that I want in my life, I wanna be productive, I wanna eat healthy, I wanna exercise. Those are all things that I want to do in my life. And yet the habit of doing what I need to do to get a good night’s sleep naturally leads to some of these other things. That’s a keystone habit.

And what James is saying here is that learning to control our tongues is a keystone habit. It is a habit that naturally leads to a ripple effect of godliness in our lives. He says, verse 3, “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’re so large and they’re 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. What he’s saying is just like, you know what I’m talking about guys. You know about really big things that are controlled by very small things. Horses are big animals, but that little thing that you put in their mouths, you can you can
steer that big animal. Ships are massive, things with all kinds of natural forces that would want them to move in one way or another, and yet by simply getting a hold of that rudder, you can make the ship go where you want it to go. He says the tongue is the same way. It's a small part, but it's capable of great things. It's capable of resulting tremendous influence on your life and on the world around you.

He says, “Getting control of the tongue, or losing control of the tongue will have a tremendous impact.” Can be positive but it can be negative, too. He says, “Consider when a great forest is set on fire by a small spark, the tongue also is a fire. It’s a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body and sets the whole course of one’s life on fire. And is itself set on fire by hell.” Does the negative side... If a tongue that’s under control can do a ripple effect of godliness in a life, a tongue that’s out of control does a ripple effect of ungodliness in the life. He says it can set on fire whole forests. And whenever I read those words, my mind immediately goes to the Hayman fire here in Colorado in 2002. Some of you may remember. I mean it lasted for weeks, and then the sky was kind of covered in smoke and ash was constantly falling on the neighborhoods around here in South Denver. But here’s the thing, the Hayman fire was tremendously expensive. It consumed 140,000 acres of forest. It cost $40 million dollars to contain. And it cost the lives of five firefighters. And do you know what started it? Some of you may remember, it was started because the Forest Service technician received a letter from her ex-husband that she burned in a campground, and the wind caught it, but it hit some pine needles and before you knew it, 140,000 acres gone, $40 million dollars and five men dead.

And that’s a stunningly concrete example of the power of words, isn’t it? Because here’s the thing, I mean, she shouldn’t have burned the note. I mean there was a fire ban on, so she’s absolutely responsible for that poor choice. But here is the reality too that I find myself asking and that is, “How might things have been different if that man had never written that letter?” I don’t know what the letter said, but I’m pretty sure it wasn’t an apology. I’m pretty sure it wasn’t heaven words being put on paper. And if he had never brought those words into the world, how might things have been radically different.

James says this is the power of the tongue. It’s a small thing but huge damage can be done. He says, “The tongue is a fire. It’s a world of evil among the parts of the body.” He says, “It corrupts the whole body.” And that’s an interesting statement. He says, “It corrupts the whole body.” That’s not what I would expect James to say at this point. What I would expect James to say is, “It can corrupt the world around you.” I expect James to say that the tongue can cause all kinds of damage in your family. It can cause all kinds of damage in your relationships. It can cause all kinds of damage in the world. But that’s not what he says. He says, “It corrupts the body.” The whole body. And that language means it corrupts yourself. It corrupts you. And that’s a surprising statement. Partly, it’s surprising too because it’s not what I think that the tongue is gonna do. It’s not like I think that things coming out of my mouth are gonna corrupt me. What I think is that what the tongue is gonna do is it’s gonna reveal that I’m corrupted, right? Did that make more sense?

Like if I have ungodly thoughts and attitudes, I expect that to be reflected in the kinds of things I say. So I expect my tongue to reveal that I’m corrupted, but that’s not what James says. James says, “The tongue corrupts the whole person,” which sounds surprisingly similar to something Jesus said. He said, “Guys, it’s not the stuff that goes into the mouth.” He says, “What goes in to the mouth is not what defiles a person.” No. No. It’s what comes out of their mouth that defiles them. He’s talking in this context about clean and unclean food in the Jewish laws, but it’s an interesting statement. He says, “It’s not the stuff that goes into you that defiles you, it’s the stuff that comes out of you that defiles you.” And again, he doesn’t say, “The stuff that comes out of you reveals that you’re defiled.” It doesn’t show what your attitudes and actions are. He says, “It defiles you.” And James says almost exactly the same thing, “It’s what comes out of your mouth that actually corrupts you.”

What’s he talking about? I think what he’s getting at is that there’s a very close relationship between what we think and what we say. And that’s not a strange thing for me to say. I think you probably get that. Yeah, we think things and then we say them, right? But what James is getting at is a surprising truth that a lot of times it gets overlooked, and that is that the relationship between what we think and what we say is actually a two-way street. It’s not just a matter of we think and therefore we speak,
but sometimes what we speak actually influences the way we think. The kinds of things that we allow ourselves to say actually cement some of the kinds of things that we actually believe.

Interesting scientific study that confirms this reality, a couple of years ago UCLA Medical Center, they put some people in one of those machines that allows them to kind of watch the brain activity, see which parts of the brain are lighting up. And once they had those people situated, they could see what their brains were doing. They showed them pictures of people that were either angry or afraid. And what they found is the people watching, their alarm center and their brains would tend to light up. When they saw pictures of people angry or afraid, the alarm center in the brain would kind of light up, which makes sense I think. Because if you see somebody angry, you worry they might be angry at you, they might be coming after you. So you’re a little alarmed. If you see somebody afraid, you’re like, “Okay, what’s after them that might be after me next?” So I’m a little alarmed. Can know if that’s surprising. What is surprising is that what they found is that the alarm center of the brain stayed active until the person said, “That person’s angry,” or, “That person’s afraid.” And as soon as they spoke those words, as soon as they verbalized what they were feeling, the alarm center of the brain quieted down. And other parts of the brain begin to light up. They begin to deal with it rationally. Interesting discovery.

What they just confirmed scientifically was the fact that what we verbalize impacts the way that we think. What we say out loud actually impacts the way that we think. Sort of tangentially. You understand that this is probably the reason why we often find it so helpful to ask people who are struggling with things to articulate what they’re feeling because the very act of verbalizing them actually allows the brain to begin categorizing things and moving beyond just the feeling stage into processing. You’re with me? Maybe I’ll make it a little bit more concrete.

Let’s deal with the same kinds of things that James has been dealing with up to this point in the book. He’s dealing primarily with the ways that we respond to people. The ways that we value people. The ways we care about people. The ways that we think about people. So let’s imagine you’re on the highway, and somebody passes you going way faster than you are, or maybe just a little bit over the speed limit. And no more, right? Or maybe just a little bit over the speed limit. This person just flies by you and you can tell as they fly by you, they’re clearly texting on their phone and they’re kind of swerving in and out of their lanes and they’re... it’s really dangerous and aggressive. And you watch them go by and you begin to feel a little bit of, let’s call it concern, okay? Now at some point, you’re gonna verbalize your concern and maybe the way you verbalize it is you say, “Would you look at that worthless piece of garbage.” None of you would ever say that, right? Or, “Look at that idiot. Look at that moron.”

And again, what I’m speaking here is not just sort of, “I think this might be true,” it’s scientifically confirmed. The moment that you verbalize that worthless piece of garbage, that idiot, that moron, your brain goes, “Oh, that’s how I file that person away. That’s who that person is. That person is a worthless piece of garbage. That person is an idiot. That person is a moron. Your brain files that person away in the “worthless piece of garbage” file. What we say actually literally begins to change the way that we think about those people. I know this is true. I’ll be honest with you, I don’t do well in traffic, okay? That whole sanctification process we were talking about, like I go backwards when I’m in traffic. I just do. And I find myself getting really irate at people. And for years, I would verbalize that with, “Look at that idiot. Look at that moron.” And what I discovered was that whenever I said that, I didn’t calm down. It was never a matter of like, “I have gotten it out of my system.” No, it was a matter of as soon as I verbalized that, I would get madder and madder and madder. Because there’s this feedback cycle. I’m telling my brain that’s who that person is by verbalizing. And my brain is like, “Okay, that person.” And then I expect even more moronic behavior because that’s who that person is.

And I didn’t know what James said about this, I didn’t make the connection at that point, but I realized it wasn’t good for my own spiritual health. So I made a decision and that is that I was gonna stop verbalizing that kind of label for people. So I chose a new line. I just started saying things like, “Whoa, that was bold.” “That was a bold move right there.” “Wow, that was bold.” “Bold driver right there.” And here’s the thing, like my family gives me a really hard time. They’re like, “Dad, we know what you mean, okay?” But let me tell you something, I discovered that a profoundly different experience was happening when I said, “That is a bold driver” versus “That is a moron right there.” “That is a moron” actually just kind of amped up my frustration.
“That is a bold driver” expressed my frustration, but it didn’t do it in a way that categorized that person as somebody that I would expect to be doing worse and worse and worse things. And actually, my frustration level kind of evened out. I mean I discovered this in practice, long before I understood what God is saying to us here when He says the tongue corrupts the whole body, corrupts the whole person. It doesn’t just reveal what’s inside of you, it can corrupt you. What we articulate, what we verbalize impacts what we’re thinking. In other words, what we say about people influences how we think about them. You’re with me?

James is saying what we say about people influences how we think about them. And the problem is we often verbalize things, leading us to think about people in ways that are not the way God thinks about them. You know he knows he says, “The tongue is a world of evil. A world of evil among our members, among our parts of our body.” And interesting enough whenever he uses the word world, in the book of James, he’s always talking about a value system, a way of looking at people and ascribing value to them. He uses the word in 1:27 when he says, “Real religion takes care of widows and orphans, rather than being corrupted by the world.” Because the world says widows and orphans they’ve got nothing to offer you, therefore they have no value. The world’s but a value system. He uses it in chapter 2, verse 5 when he says, “I don’t want you showing favoritism to the rich, you need to love and elevate the people that the world calls poor, that the world says they’ve got no value, they’re worthless because they don’t have any money, or power, or privilege. They’re worthless.” That’s the world. The world’s always a value system.

So when he talks about the tongue being a world of evil, what he’s saying is that the tongue is one of the primary ways that the world’s value system begins to invade our lives. That as we begin to talk about people in the way that the world does, we begin to think about people in the way the world does. And the problem is, the world’s way of thinking about people’s not neutral. It’s not just a little bit different than God’s way of thinking about people, it’s 180 degrees different. In fact, he says, “The tongue itself is set on fire by hell.” He says the world’s way of thinking about people is actually Satan’s way of thinking about people. And we cannot allow that way of thinking to invade our lives by adopting that way of speaking. What he’s saying is that adopting the world’s way of speaking about people will lead us to adopt Satan’s way of thinking about them. Does that make sense?

Adopting the world’s way of talking about people can lead us to adopting Satan’s way of thinking about people.

Forget a medal for a second. Wives, how do you talk about your husbands? When you’re with your girlfriends, with your kids, at work, how do you talk about your husbands? What kinda names do you call him? I am actually genuinely curious because I don’t know that I’ve heard a lot of like standard clichés that women have for men. I mean I think there’s a lot of, you know, “My husband’s lazy.” The thing is every time you say that, your brain goes, “Oh, that’s who he is. He’s a lazy person.” I don’t know that women have all these many labels, but certainly, you know, men have a few, for their wives. My favorite one is probably the ball and chain. My old ball and chain. Yeah, the old ball and chain. Here’s the thing, every time you say that, your brain goes, “Oh, that’s who she is.” You file it away.

Husbands, how do you talk about your wives? And is that leading you to think about them the way God called you to think about them or is it leading you to think about them the way the world, aka Satan, calls you to think about them. I was in an Alaskan village years ago, in an Eskimo’s house, and we are having a conversation, kind of in the middle the conversation he looked at me and he goes, “Hey, are you married?” And I said, “Yeah, yeah, I have a wife.” And he goes, “No, you don’t.” I was like, “Pretty sure I do.” He goes, “No, no, no, you don’t have a wife, you have a bride.” He said, “Wife sounds like a possession. Sounds like you own her. Don’t call her your wife. Call her your bride. Whenever we just talk about her from now on, call her your bride.” And there’s a part of me that went, “That’s gonna be awkward.” But I started trying and I discovered something really interesting, and that is that when I talked about Coletta as my bride, it actually brought up feelings of tenderness that the word wife just didn’t do. And so I don’t do it all the time, but I often do it. It leads to some weird situations every now and then. Like, “Oh yeah this is my bride, Coletta.” And they’re like, “Oh, you just got married?” “No, going on 24 years now.” But I’ve discovered, for me at least, that simply calling her my bride actually changes the way that I think about her. Just that word has a ripple effect of Godly attitude in me. Even when we’re in the midst of a conflict, if I say to myself, because I’ve actually found there’s power actually saying it out loud, if I say to myself, “This is your bride,” it often changes the tenor of my attitude at least in that conversation in profound ways.
So, how do you talk about your spouse? How do you talk about your boss? What kind of language do you use? How do you talk about your kids? Your parents? How do you talk about your coworkers? Your neighbors? How do you talk about other human beings in your life? And is the way that you describe them, does that move you towards God’s way of thinking about them? Or does it move you towards Satan’s way of thinking about them? Because that’s kind of the only options we’re given. The language we use actually moves us further down one of those roads.

He says, “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.” And again, we read deadly poison and we’re like, “Oh yeah, this is the power that I have to poison other people. It’s the power that I have as a wife to poison my kids against their father, or as a husband to poison my kids against their mother. Or other people against a coworker. It’s poison that I have to speak into the world.” But you notice at this point, throughout this whole passage, James isn’t talking about the impact that we have on others, he’s talking about the impact that we have on ourselves. He says, “Your tongue is a means of poisoning your own heart and mind.”

The problem is that the way we use our tongues actually creates a conflict between what God’s trying to do in us and what we’re actually allowing to be accomplished. It’s a little bit like, I don’t know, it’s like a Zamboni. You need to know Zambonis, right? They are the ones that they go out on the ice and they clean off, and they get rid of the cracks, and the nicks and all of that. They smooth it out. They make it all right. Well, if you can imagine a Zamboni that’s doing that but it’s dragging behind it a bunch of concrete blocks that are tumbling, and they’re scratching, and they’re nicking, and they’re gouging again. What he’s saying is the way that we use our tongues is actually working contrary to the work the Holy Spirit is doing in us. The Holy Spirit is moving us to be Jesus-like people. It’s moving us to think about other people in the way Jesus thinks about other people. But the way we use our tongues is actually poisoning us in a way that’s working contrary to the very work that God Himself is doing in us. It’s full of a deadly poison with which we’re poisoning ourselves. Because 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. This is not a hypothetical. He says this is what’s happening. The same tongues that we used to praise God, we use to curse human beings made as God’s image. We use to talk about human beings in ways that demean and devalue them. And we’re like, “Yeah, but I’m not saying it to them. It’s just, you know, I’m just venting.” And he goes, “Yeah, but you’re doing a lot more damage than you think. You think you’re venting, but in fact, what you’re doing is cementing. You’re cementing the way you think about these people.” And so the tongue that is praising God is also cursing those made in His image and this should not be. This must not be.

Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives? Or a great vine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water. And you understand what he’s saying. This is really part two of what he said in the last passage we looked at last week. Last week we saw that faith without works is dead. That if you’re saved by grace, then you’re going to be the kind of people who do works of grace. If you’ve been saved by God’s mercy, you are gonna treat others in merciful ways. Your life is gonna reflect in action the reality of what God has done inside you. And so as Pastor Mike said it last week, he said, “Real religion can be seen with your eyes. It’s not that our works save us, but that our works are a natural outcome of the saving work that’s been done in us. So real religion can be seen with your eyes.” And what he says this week is, “In the same way that faith without works is dead, so too, faith without words is dead.” That if our mouths, if our tongues do not speak grace, then there’s a fundamental disconnect between the grace that’s been poured into us. If God has spoken grace into our lives, then we should be speaking grace out of our lives. We should be talking about people in such a way that’s consistent with the way God thinks about them, otherwise there’s this fundamental disconnect happening. So in the same way that he says, “Real religion can be seen with your eyes,” he also says, “Real religion can be heard with your ears.” Does that make sense?

I know it’s easier said than done, but understand the reality of it, that if you’ve been saved by grace, then you will be people
who speak out grace, whether it’s directly to people, in talking to others about those people, or even just muttering under our breaths. Our tongues should be speaking out the reality of what’s being done inside us. Real religion can be heard with your ears, which means that we’re in constant need of speech therapy. At least I am. I don’t know about you, but as I wrestle through this passage this week, I’ve realized, “Yeah, I’ve still got a lot of work to do—my tongue.”

And then the good news is, as we saw James say that by working on our tongue, by trying to bring control to our tongue, there can be a ripple effect into other parts of our lives where we can see progress in our growth in Christ that we wouldn’t see otherwise. Speech therapy has a lot more impact than just controlling our tongue.

And as I wrestled through this week, there were three things that I came to realize that I needed to be doing so that I could be cooperating with the work that God’s doing in me. And the first is just this, that I need to ask the question, what do I need to stop consuming that’s influencing my speech? It’s a good question to ask yourself this week. What do I need to stop consuming because it’s influencing my speech? It’s influencing the way I talk. Because what we hear people say often becomes the kinds of things that we speak, but the kind of things we speak impact the way that we think. So what do I need to stop consuming because it’s not leading me to speak in the way that God calls me to speak? And the easy answer at this point is, “Oh, you know, I needed not go to rated-R movies. I needed not to watch movies where there’s cussing because I don’t want to be cussing.” But here’s the thing, James isn’t talking about cussing. I’m not saying cussing is good, please don’t mishear me. I’m not saying feel free to curse and cuss. No. No. No. What I’m saying is that’s an easy out. James isn’t talking about foul language, he’s talking about foul attitudes. He’s talking about talking about other human beings that does not reflect the reality they are made as the image of God. So my question is to you, what are you allowing yourself to be influenced by in terms of the way that you talk about other people?

Do you hang out with a group of guys or women who lead you to talk about your spouse in a way that’s demeaning, and devaluing, and disrespectful? Then either you need to change the way that group speaks or you need to not be part of that group anymore. Is it a Facebook page? Is it a particular kind of a report that you listen to on a regular basis? Is that an email chain you belong to? But what are you consuming that’s influencing the way that you’re speaking?

Second thing we have to wrestle with is what do I need to start confessing? So what do I need to stop consuming? And what do I need to start confessing about my speech? Meaning what do I need to recognize in my speech patterns that is, in fact, sin? And I need to start calling it what it is. I need to start calling it sin because that’s what it is and all the other ways that we talk about it are actually getting in the way of what God wants to do in me. And we have lots of different ways that we justify the ways we talk. The favorite one I’ve already mentioned is that we like to say, “I’m just venting.” Listen, venting is cementing. The more that we vent, the more that we cement the way we’re actually thinking about the people that we’re venting about. Now, understand, I’m not saying that you can’t share what you’re feeling. I’m not saying cussing is good, please don’t mishear me. I’m not saying feel free to curse and cuss. No. No. No. What I’m saying is that’s an easy out. James isn’t talking about foul language, he’s talking about foul attitudes. He’s talking about talking about other human beings that does not reflect the reality they are made as the image of God. So my question is to you, what are you allowing yourself to be influenced by in terms of the way that you talk about other people?

You can say, “I’m frustrated because my husband, he’s not doing some things that I really need him to do.” That’s different than, “My husband is a lazy bum.” You can say, “I’m frustrated because my wife and I, we’re constantly in conflict,” okay? That’s okay. That’s very different than, “My wife is a...” Oh, interesting. I wonder what many people filled in that blank with. I’m not gonna say it. You understand what I’m saying? Listen, that’s not venting. That’s sin. The ways that we talk about people need to be described and called what they are, sin, because at the moment that we call it sin, Jesus goes, “All right. I can deal with that.” Jesus died on the cross to forgive all of your sin. All of the ways we stumble, including the ways we stumble in our speech, but that forgiveness is applied to our lives at the moment that we call sin, sin. And as long as you go, “Yeah, I’m just venting. Yeah, I’m just letting it out. It’s not...” Jesus’ like, “Argh.” Dude, just call it what it is. And as soon as you go, “Yeah, what I’m doing with my tongue is sin,” Jesus goes, “You’re right. It is, and now it’s forgiven. Let’s move on from here.” What do I need to confess
about my speech patterns?

And third, what do I need to start changing about my speech? And here’s the interesting thing, what James says is very clear. He says, “No human can tame the tongue,” okay? I’m not saying that you have the ability to change your speech patterns, the world’s influence on us is too strong. Does God want to do in us what only he can do, okay? But he calls us to cooperate with it. He calls us to recognize those places where his Holy Spirit needs to begin working so that we’re not resisting. So that we’re not dragging along behind him the concrete blocks that are just doing as much damage as he’s fixing. So we identify those places where our speech patterns are ungodly and we begin to go, “Okay, God, I recognize that you need to work in there so I’m gonna cooperate. I’m gonna try to come right behind you and stay in step with what you’re doing in my life.”

And then that leaves me just one last question that you need to ask and it’s just this, do I have what I need to be able to make these changes? And what I mean by that is... well, I mean a couple of things I guess. If you’re a believer, if you’re a follower of Jesus, then you have the Holy Spirit, but maybe you need to put yourself in a group of people who hold you accountable with the way you use your tongue. Maybe that’s one of the ways you cooperate with what God’s doing. Maybe you need to have those positive voices speaking into your life. But if you’re not a follower of Jesus, you need to understand that the kind of speech therapy we’re talking about is impossible. Apart from the power of the Holy Spirit, what James is talking about here can never be changed. And so if you’re here today and you don’t have a relationship with God through faith in Jesus, understand you don’t have what you need to be able to make these kind of changes but you can. But you need to have that relationship with God through faith in Jesus first, and if you don’t have it, and you want it, come talk to me after the service. Talk to one of the people who’s down here praying after the service, they’d love to explain to you how easy it is to begin a relationship with Jesus that not only forgives your sin, but it begins to make the changes in you that you wish could be made but you fail that time and time again on your own, because you can’t do it on your own. By faith in Him, He will give you the ability to do what could never be done on your own.

God, we thank you that you’ve given us a tongue that can give you praise and we confess that we’ve often used it to curse others, to talk about others in ways that devalue them and demeans them and we ask for your forgiveness. We ask that you do whatever work in us that’s necessary to create in us tongues that consistently bring you glory and also consistently reinforce what you’re doing in our lives. We realize we can’t do this alone, but we commit to cooperating with you in the work that you’re doing in us by paying attention to what we’re doing with our tongues. In Jesus’ name, amen.