

Week 3 - Small Fire, Big Forest

Series: What is a Follower of the Way?

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Primary Scripture: James 3:1–18

The Power and Weight of Our Words

Good morning, Menlo Church. It is so good to be with you today, whether you're watching online or joining us at Saratoga, San Mateo, Mountain View, or Menlo Park. My name is Matt, I'm one of the pastors here, and if this is your first time with us or your first time back in a long time, I'm really glad you chose to spend part of your weekend with us.

At Menlo, we really believe that hope is for everyone, and because of that, we want to be a community of faith where you don't have to pretend to be somewhere you're not. Maybe you have had a faith that has carried you for years, maybe you've been skeptical, or maybe you're not even entirely sure why you're here yet. Wherever you find yourself today, there is room for you here, and my hope is that something today helps you take an honest next step in your life.

Today, we're talking about something everybody has and nobody completely controls: our words. The things we say when we're thoughtful, the things that come out when we're frustrated, and the things we say when we really need somebody else to understand our point of view. Whether you consider yourself religious or not, we all know that words can carry an incredible amount of weight.

We live in an interesting moment because almost everyone has a platform now. There was a time when you needed a microphone, a newspaper column, or somebody willing to publish you before your opinion could travel very far. Now you just need a phone and opposable thumbs. We react before we understand, respond before we listen, and can send out a statement about something or someone further and faster than ever before.

But this is not really a technology problem. Human beings have been hurting and healing each other with words long before the internet showed up. A few words from someone we love can give us courage for years; a sentence spoken in anger can change the temperature of a relationship almost instantly; and sometimes the words that stay with us the longest were never shouted at all—they were calm, clear, and impossible to forget.

Most of us have a moment like that stored somewhere in our memory: something someone said to us, or something we said ourselves, that we wish could be retrieved. That is part of what makes language so strange—once words leave us, they belong to the person who heard them too. We can explain what we meant, apologize for what we did, even repair some of the damage, but we cannot reach back through time and make the sentence unsaid.

Author Rudyard Kipling was once asked to give a speech to the Royal College of Surgeons, and he said this: *"I am, by calling, a dealer in words; and words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind."* I found that statement really insightful and terrifying.

A drug is small relative to its effect. A few milligrams of something can change an entire body; it can relieve pain, alter consciousness, restore something that is failing, or in the wrong dose and the wrong hands, cause tremendous harm. Words have that same disproportionate quality. A sentence may occupy only a few seconds of air. Physically, almost nothing happened. And yet those words can enter another person and alter their confidence, arouse suspicion, bolster our courage, or bring us great shame. We tend to measure words by how small the moment seemed—*it was just a comment, it was one conversation, I only said it once in passing*—but in reality, some of the most consequential things ever said to us probably took less than ten seconds to say. Our words have power. I think the question is whether wisdom is guiding what we do with it.

Wisdom is not merely knowing what is true; wisdom shows us how we carry truth, when to speak it, and what our words are trying to create in the person receiving them. And our words reveal our wisdom. In this series, we've been asking: What is a follower of The Way? Not simply, "What does a person of faith know?" but, "What kind of person are you becoming by following Jesus?"

So today, if you are not sure you believe in Jesus, I invite you to listen in and ask whether the life He invites you to is true, good, and worth trusting. And if you have been a follower of Jesus for some time, the invitation is to resist letting your familiarity convince you that your formation is finished. Before we go any further, I want to ask God for the courage to confront our conduct and the humility, honesty, and wisdom to see what is beneath our words. Let's pray.

Becoming a Thoughtful Witness

One of the voices guiding us through this series is a man named James. James was the younger brother of Jesus, which gave him extraordinary proximity, but it apparently did not make belief any easier. He knew Jesus as family and still did not believe He was who He claimed to be until after the resurrection. It isn't lost on me that being around Jesus and actually recognizing Jesus are not necessarily the same thing, and I think it really influenced how he wrote.

James writes with an intensely practical perspective for believers: Is what we say we believe becoming visible in the way we actually live? Over the last two weeks, we have looked at that formation from the inside out: first the divided places within us, then the way that division can affect how we see and treat other people. Today, we are exploring one of the qualities we hope Jesus forms in us: becoming a Thoughtful Witness.

And before we make "witness" into a churchy word, let's understand it as it is defined more broadly: a witness is simply someone who has seen, experienced, or come to believe something and then decides how to represent it to somebody else.

We all do that through what we share, what we defend, and what we say about the people and ideas around us. Whether you are deeply religious, cautiously curious, or somewhere in between, we are all witnesses. The question I want us to ponder today is: Are we being wise about it?

With that in mind, let's actually look at James chapter 3. It should be noted that James opens this chapter with a sobering statement that all pastors and leaders should take to heart: *Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.*

As the person standing in front of you right now, this feels personal. But it's also helpful because before James says anything about anyone else's words, he puts the person doing the teaching underneath the text first. I'm not standing outside of this passage trying to fix your words with mine; I'm in it too.

James 3:1–6

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 also to bridle his whole body. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well.

Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, 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 things. 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 life, and set on fire by hell.

There is a lot happening in those verses, but I want to begin where James begins: *"For we all stumble in many ways."* James is not separating thoughtful people from reckless people; he has already included himself and now he includes us. And when he talks about a "perfect" person here, he is not imagining somebody who never makes a mistake.

James is saying that if you could completely govern what comes out of your mouth, you would be mature enough to govern just about everything else too. Then he gives us three pictures: a bit in the mouth of a horse, a rudder underneath a ship, and a small fire that can set an entire forest ablaze. Together, they are making one observation: something can be very small and still exert influence wildly disproportionate to its size.

But I think James stays with fire because it gives him something the other images cannot. A bit directs and a rudder steers, but fire spreads. It moves recklessly beyond the place where it started, it can affect people who were nowhere near the original flame, and if it gets large enough, it changes the environment around it. You can be miles away from a fire and still find yourself breathing what it produced.

About six months into our new life in California, we were living month to month in a short-term rental home. We had already weathered a lot of change as a family and I knew almost nothing about wildfires, so I had absolutely no category for what happened on September 9, 2020. We woke up to an uncommonly dark morning. The shades were drawn, but the strange part was that the light just was not there.

When we stepped outside, the entire sky was orange-copper. I'm a very big Lord of the Rings fan, but I've never wanted to experience Mordor. I remember thinking: *Is this normal? Do we stay? Do we go? Where exactly are we supposed to go?*

What we all came to learn afterward is that this was not one giant fire burning just outside our neighborhood. Smoke from multiple enormous fires across California and Oregon had traveled, risen high into the atmosphere above us, and filtered the sunlight over the Bay Area. The flames were somewhere else, and yet their effects were completely surrounding us.

But the largest wildfire in California history didn't begin as one enormous fire. It began as dozens of separate lightning strikes that ignited separate fires which eventually grew together. Relationships rarely burn down from one sentence. More often, there are small fires that are never extinguished: resentment, contempt, defensiveness, jealousy, and eventually what seemed far off and separate has surrounded us.

The Atmosphere Created by Our Speech

Fire creates an atmosphere far beyond the place where the flame began. Words can do that too. A word can change the atmosphere of a home; the way we talk about somebody can alter the trust on a team; the language used in a church can teach people whether it is safe to be honest there. Words do not simply leave our mouths; they create environments that other people have to live in.

And I think this is one of the reasons we underestimate our own speech. When I am the one who said something, I only remember how brief the moment was. The person on the other side remembers what changed after it. I set the spark; they experienced the fire. Intent still matters, but wisdom asks us to care about more than what we intended; it asks us to pay attention to what our words are actually producing.

I think one of the uncomfortable things about an atmosphere is that even though we create it, we're not always aware of it. We get used to our own tone, our own patterns, even our own sarcasm. What feels normal to me may feel heavy to somebody else. What I experience as being direct may be experienced as being dismissive. What I think was a passing comment may be something another person has been carrying around all week.

So what is the solution for controlling the atmosphere? It can't be that we become afraid of every word we say or spend our lives trying to control how everybody interprets us. That would be exhausting and, honestly, impossible. But the way of wisdom means we are more curious about the effect we are having.

If the same tension keeps showing up in a relationship, if people seem guarded around us, or if the people closest to us are consistently bracing for how we are going to respond, wisdom should make us curious instead of immediately defensive.

Maybe the more useful question is not simply, *"What did I mean?"* but:

What seems to happen around me when I speak this way?

Do people become more honest or more careful?

More secure or more defensive?

More willing to engage, or more eager to withdraw?

We cannot take responsibility for every reaction another person has, but we can become honest about patterns we produce. And sometimes the atmosphere around us is telling us something about ourselves that our intentions alone cannot.

If somebody comes to mind right now, I don't think the answer is to craft a better explanation for why you said what you said. Maybe it is to go back and own your part. You cannot un-say a sentence, but you can stop feeding the fire. You can apologize without defending yourself. You can acknowledge impact without pretending intent did not matter. And in doing so, you can begin changing the atmosphere one conversation at a time.

So maybe carry this question out with you today:

What atmosphere are your words creating for the people around you?

James has shown us the disproportionate influence of something incredibly small, and I think part of embodying wisdom is becoming honest about the fires we can see. But if we really want to understand why those fires keep starting, eventually we have to become curious about more than the spark. We have to pay attention to the conditions that made it so ready to burn in the first place.

| Exposing What Accumulates Inside Us

Last month, our family moved into a new home, and in the weeks leading up to the move, we began purging and getting rid of what we didn't need. I thought we were ahead of the curve, but I was so, so tragically wrong. There are few experiences more humbling than moving because eventually you have to open every drawer, every cabinet, every closet and confront the decisions you have been postponing for years.

Suddenly, I'm holding the toy my son was looking for months ago, a key that nobody recognizes but looks important, and a charging cable for a device we threw out during the Obama administration. You laugh, but we have something in common because every house has that one drawer. You know the one.

It might technically be called a kitchen drawer, but at some point it lost any meaningful connection to the kitchen. You open it looking for scissors and instead discover Command strips, receipts, birthday candles, random screws, and an instruction manual for something you already returned; and somehow

the scissors are never there. The drawer has become a place where things go because we don't know where else to put them.

What struck me while we were packing is that moving did not create any of that stuff. Moving exposed it. The boxes did not produce the clutter; they forced us to see what had quietly accumulated while we were living our normal lives. And once everything was spread out in front of us, I couldn't keep pretending that the problem was the drawer. The drawer was just holding what we had been putting into it. And I wonder if our words work like that sometimes.

We tend to focus on the moment something comes out of us because that is the part everyone can see or hear. *Why did I say that? Where did that come from? I need to stop doing that.* But maybe the uncomfortable answer is that our words are sometimes exposing things that have been accumulating in us for much longer than the conversation where they finally appeared.

The argument did not necessarily create the resentment. The criticism did not create the insecurity. The stressful moment may not have created the anger. It simply opened the drawer. If all we ever do is try to manage what comes out, we can spend years rearranging the contents without ever becoming curious about what keeps getting stored there.

And I think this is exactly where James takes us next. He has shown us what the tongue can do when the fire gets out. But now he begins asking a deeper question about whether we can actually control what keeps coming out of us in the first place.

James 3:7–12

For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it 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. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

If James believed our problem was simply a lack of discipline, he could have given us a better technique: Speak less. Pause longer. Think before you talk. Those are all good ideas, but James says the problem is more persistent than that.

He asks whether fresh water and salt water can come from the same source, or whether a fig tree can produce olives. James stops staring at what came out and starts asking what kind of source could produce it. The issue is no longer just the words themselves; he is asking what those words are revealing about what has been forming underneath them.

The intended recipients of this letter are people of faith, and he's confronting their incongruity: how they sincerely bless God and then use the same mouth to diminish a person who bears God's image. This

isn't a problem of the past. He is showing them, and us, how divided we can be; genuine devotion can coexist with resentment, insecurity, or ambition that we have never let God address. The mouth has a way of exposing that contradiction. Wisdom is not merely knowing what is true; wisdom shows us how we carry that truth. Our words reveal our wisdom. If words are the fruit, wisdom is the root.

And if truly the tongue cannot be tamed, now the question is no longer: Can we overcome our inconsistency? We can't. But are we doomed to be duplicitous people who praise God on Sunday morning and demean our servers at lunch on Sunday afternoon? I don't think James is asking us to become discouraged by our inconsistency. I think he is asking us to become honest about the limits of simply trying harder to manage it.

When we finally emptied the kitchen drawer during the move, the goal was not to become the kind of family that would never accumulate anything again. That would last about five minutes. The helpful part was that once everything was out in the open, we could finally decide what belonged, what needed to be thrown away, and what had been sitting there for years simply because nobody wanted to deal with it.

I think that's part of what being a Thoughtful Witness means. We become willing to pay attention to what our words are exposing. If resentment keeps showing up, we stop treating resentment like a vocabulary problem. If insecurity keeps turning conversations into competitions, we stop pretending the only issue was our tone. If anger keeps finding the same exit, wisdom makes us curious about what keeps resupplying it.

That is why I don't hear "no human being can tame the tongue" as James telling us we are doomed. I hear it as James taking away the illusion that enough self-control will eventually make us whole. There are things in us we cannot simply organize, suppress, or discipline our way out of. And that is actually good news, because spiritual formation was never supposed to be a renovation project we completed on ourselves.

So maybe one of the practices we can begin with is paying attention when our words surprise us. You hear yourself say something sharper than you intended, you notice the same criticism coming out again, or you walk away from a conversation thinking, *Why did that bother me so much?* Our instinct is usually to clean up the sentence and move on. But a Thoughtful Witness can let that moment become information. Instead of only asking, *"How do I make sure I don't say that again?"* we can ask:

What did that reveal that I might need to pay attention to?

And I don't think that requires turning every conversation into an exhausting exercise in self-analysis. Sometimes it is as simple as noticing what keeps showing up. Maybe at the end of the day you think back over the conversations that carried more heat than they should have and ask:

What was I carrying into that room?

What seemed to come out of me easily today?

Is there something here I have been storing instead of actually dealing with?

Not so that we can shame ourselves for finding something in the drawer, but so that we can finally stop pretending it isn't there.

When we moved, emptying that drawer was only useful if we were willing to do something with what we found. Some things belonged there. Some things belonged somewhere else. Some things had no business coming with us into the new house at all. And I wonder if part of following Jesus is becoming willing to let Him tell us the difference: not simply managing what other people can see, but allowing Him access to what has been accumulating underneath it.

The drawer does not need a better lid; it needs to be emptied. The fruit does not change its flavor because we washed it; something has to happen at the root. And I think that is the invitation for evaluation: don't only regret what came out. Become curious about what it came from.

Heavenly Wisdom vs. Earthly Ambition

James has spent this whole chapter revealing how what comes out of us is connected to what has been forming inside of us. Now he finally names the thing underneath it all: Wisdom. Not simply, "What do you know?" but, "What kind of person are you becoming?"

James 3:13–16

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.

This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

If you watch enough reality TV, you already know that's true!

James does not define wisdom by how much somebody knows or how quickly they can make their point. He says wisdom becomes visible in "good conduct" and in "the meekness of wisdom." Meekness is not passivity; it is a posture. It does not need to dominate somebody else in order to prove that it is right. James is asking whether what we call wisdom is actually producing a wise kind of person.

I can say something that is technically true and still be carrying it with resentment. I can defend something good and still be driven by the need to win. The content of what I say matters, but James is refusing to let the correctness of my words excuse the condition of my heart.

A "Thoughtful" Witness cannot simply mean being agreeable. Conflict, strong disagreement, and anger itself are not automatically sinful; Jesus experienced all three. Sometimes love requires clarity, confrontation, or saying something the other person does not want to hear. The question is not whether there is heat in the conversation; the more revealing question is: What is fueling the heat?

And I think a deeper question underneath that one is:

What am I trying to create in the person on the other side?

Am I hoping they understand something true, even if we still disagree?

Am I trying to protect somebody who is being harmed?

Or have I quietly moved from wanting them to see something to needing them to lose?

Am I fighting to fix it or am I fixin' to fight?

Selfish ambition can borrow the language of conviction very easily, and it can make winning feel like faithfulness.

The two extremes that come to mind for me are the Scholar versus the Street Preacher. The street preacher is determined to make sure everybody hears what he believes is true. Whether others can hear any love in the way he delivers it is irrelevant. He has a message, he has courage, he has volume, and he is definitely witnessing to something. But if the way he carries that truth consistently creates contempt for the people receiving it, James would make us curious about the wisdom underneath that witness.

On the other side is the thoughtful scholar who understands every nuance, has read every book, can explain every objection, and is so careful about saying the wrong thing that they never really risk saying what they believe at all. There may be humility and thoughtfulness there, but eventually a witness—wait for it—has to witness! If nobody ever discovers what you have seen, experienced, been convicted by, or come to believe because you are waiting for the perfect sentence and the perfect moment, something is missing.

And given the choice of being all thoughtful and no witness versus all witness but not thoughtful, I hope a person of faith, who has been shaped by wisdom, would reject those options. Carrying truth means having conviction without contempt, courage without selfish ambition, and humility that does not disappear when the conversation gets difficult. Words reveal our wisdom, and they shape our witness.

People rarely experience our convictions as abstract ideas: they experience them through us. Through our tone, our timing, our willingness to listen, the way we speak about people who are not in the room, and what happens when someone disagrees with us. The wisdom underneath our words becomes part of the evidence people use to understand what we are witnessing to.

Sowing Seeds of Peace

So what kind of wisdom are we asking God to form in us? If our words reveal our wisdom, and wisdom shapes our witness, what does wisdom from God actually sound like when it makes its way into a human life?

James 3:17–18

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

James names this wisdom as "from above." And after telling us that no human being can tame the tongue, he finally points us toward something we do not and cannot manufacture. It is wisdom we receive from God and allow to form us. James is describing a person whose inner life has been changed enough that something different can begin coming out.

This author grew up alongside Jesus and, for years, did not recognize Him for who He really was; he lived alongside the perfect representation of wisdom and missed it. But our failure to recognize or represent wisdom well does not have to be the end of our story. It wasn't for James. And that gives me hope.

When I look at this description—peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy—I see the way of Jesus. Not weak. Not evasive. Jesus could confront hypocrisy, tell difficult truths, and refuse to bend conviction, but he never needed to make another person smaller in order to prove Himself right. That is what I want wisdom to form in me. Not simply better words, but a better witness.

So here is one practice I want to invite us into this week. At the end of the day, ask one question:

What did my words create today?

Not, "Did I win?" Not even, "Was I technically right?" What did they create? Peace, or disorder? Honesty, or defensiveness? Did they make it easier for the people around me to encounter the character of Jesus, or harder? These are the questions that a Thoughtful Witness can carry daily.

One phrase in that list that stands out to me is being "open to reason." I don't think that means you have no conviction or that everybody talks you out of what you believe. I think it means that you have enough wisdom to not be threatened by listening. You can enter a conversation believing something deeply and still believe the person across from you may see something you need to understand. It's a special trait and one that we can't practice alone. At some point wisdom has to be practiced in the presence of people who see things differently than you do.

Thoughtful Witnesses need clinical hours. We need places where we can practice listening, asking questions, admitting when we do not know, sharing what we believe, and staying present when somebody disagrees. That's why environments like Alpha and Menlo Next matter; they are not classrooms for people who already have all the answers; they are spaces where we learn to carry faith in connection with actual people. If you have never done either one, maybe your next step is not learning one more thing about Jesus by yourself. Maybe it is practicing the way with somebody else.

James began this chapter with a tiny spark setting an entire forest on fire, but he ends with something much slower: sowing. You can start a fire in seconds. You cannot grow a harvest in seconds. You plant

something, tend it, and trust that over time it becomes more than what you put into the ground. I think there is something really hopeful about that. Some of us know exactly how quickly our words have damaged something, and repair usually does not happen at the same speed. Wisdom may look like sowing peace into a relationship for many seasons before you ever see what grows from it.

So whether you follow the way of Jesus or you are still deciding what you believe about him, I think the invitation is the same: welcome wisdom into your life by looking at Jesus and ask him to form in you a wisdom that makes your life, not just your language, look more like his. We may not be able to retrieve every word we wish we could take back, but with Jesus we can become people whose next words begin sowing something better. Let's pray.