

PLEASANT SPRINGS CHURCH • SERMON • THE BOOK OF JAMES (JACOB)

Our Words Show Our Character

The tongue is a small member — and it tells the truth about us whether we mean it to or not

Our Words Show Our Character

A Sermon on James 3:1–12 — The Tongue, the Heart, and the Wisdom from Above

Shane Gunn • Disciple of Christ • Pleasant Springs Church • August 2, 2026

Key Texts: James 3:1–12 • James 1:19–27 • James 4:11–12 • James 5:12 • Matthew 12:34–37
• Proverbs 18:21

A bit in a horse's mouth. A rudder on a ship. A single spark in dry grass. Jacob — the man we call James, the half-brother of our Lord — reaches for three small things to make one large point: **the smallest member of your body sets the direction of your whole life, and it broadcasts what is actually in your heart.** This sermon walks the third chapter of James, then traces the three places in the letter where he returns to our speech, and ends where he ends: not with a technique for controlling the tongue, but with the wisdom that comes down from above.

THE BIG IDEA

Following Jesus is not merely agreeing with true information about Him. Jacob says you become wise by *living* the way Jesus summed up the Torah — love God with everything you have, and love your neighbor as yourself. And the fastest way to find out whether that has actually happened in you is to listen to how you talk. **How we speak to people, and about people, opens a window into the heart. Our words tell the truth about our character.**

DELIVERY OUTLINE — ABOUT 20 MINUTES

TIME	MOVEMENT
0:00	Read the text — James 3:1–12
2:30	Who is speaking — the brother who did not believe
4:00	One. The small thing that steers the whole life
7:30	Two. A fire, and a poison
11:00	Three. The broken fountain
13:30	Four. Three more places — speed, slander, spin
16:00	Where words actually come from — the heart
17:30	The wisdom from above — and the prayer
19:00	Closing — So What?

Everything below the closing — Author & Audience, the history of Jacob, the discussion questions — is study material, not preached. It is here for the congregation to take home.

James 3:1–6 (Greek & ESV)

Μὴ πολλοὶ διδάσκαλοι γίνεσθε, ἀδελφοί μου... πολλὰ γὰρ πταίομεν ἅπαντες. εἴ τις ἐν λόγῳ οὐ πταίει, οὗτος τέλειος ἀνὴρ, δυνατὸς χαλιναγωγεῖν καὶ ὅλον τὸ σῶμα.

“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.”

James 3:7–12 (Greek & ESV)

τὴν δὲ γλῶσσαν οὐδεὶς δαμάσαι δύναται ἀνθρώπων, ἀκατάστατον κακόν, μεστήν ἰοῦ θανατηφόρου... ἐκ τοῦ αὐτοῦ στόματος ἐξέρχεται εὐλογία καὶ κατάρα. οὐ χρή, ἀδελφοί μου, ταῦτα οὕτως γίνεσθαι.

“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.”

Understand who is talking to us. The man who wrote this letter grew up in the same house as Jesus of Nazareth — Mark names him among the Lord’s brothers (Mark 6:3). He ate at the same table. He heard the same mother sing. And John tells us plainly what he made of it at the time: *“For not even his brothers believed in him”* (John 7:5).

So what changed? Paul gives us the answer in one short line about the risen Christ: *“Then he appeared to James”* (1 Corinthians 15:7). Somewhere between the cross and Pentecost, the risen Lord went and found His brother. By Acts 1 the man who did not believe is in the upper room praying. By Acts 15 he is presiding over the most consequential meeting the church has ever held, and Paul calls him a pillar (Galatians 2:9).

When this man opens his letter, he does not say “Jacob, the brother of the Lord.” He writes: **“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ”** (James 1:1). He had the one credential nobody else in the church could claim — and he laid it down. That is a man who has learned to guard his mouth.

Remember that when he says “we all stumble in many ways.” He is not preaching down at us. He puts himself in the sentence: *we* stumble, *we* all do.

Jacob gives us three pictures, and every one of them is about **disproportion** — something tiny governing something enormous.

The bit. A strap of leather and a bar of iron, and a thousand-pound animal goes where you point it.

The rudder. A grain ship driven by a gale, and one man's hand on a small board decides which harbor it reaches — “wherever the will of the pilot directs.”

The spark. One ember, one careless moment, and “how great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!”

Notice what the first two have that the third does not. A bit and a rudder are *small things under control*, and they produce a destination. A spark is a *small thing out of control*, and it produces a ruin. Your tongue will be one or the other. There is no third option — there are only lives steered on purpose and lives steered by accident.

And look what Jacob claims for the man who gets this right: “if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a **perfect** man, able also to bridle his whole body.” That word does not mean sinless. In Greek it is *teleios* (τέλειος), and behind it stands the Hebrew *tamim* — **whole, complete, all of one piece**. It is the opposite of the double-minded man of chapter one, “unstable in all his ways” (James 1:8).

Here is the point that ought to sit down on us: most of us are not wicked people. Most of us are *fractured* people. We hold beliefs on Sunday that our Tuesday does not know about. Jacob is not asking whether you sin; he already told you we all stumble in many ways. He is asking whether the person who speaks in your kitchen is the same person who sings in this room. God is on a mission to take fractured people and make them whole — and He starts, remarkably, with the mouth.

Jacob is not being poetic when he calls the tongue a fire. He is being precise about three things fire does.

Fire spreads. A word does not stay where you dropped it. It travels to the person you said it about, and to the people they tell, and it is still burning long after you forgot you struck the match.

Fire consumes. It is “staining the whole body.” The damage does not stop at the hearer — it comes back on the speaker. You cannot spend years saying cruel things and remain a kind person.

Fire has a source. And this is the line that should stop us cold: it is “set on fire by **hell**.”

The word there is *Gehenna* (γέεννα) — the burning valley south of Jerusalem, the Lord’s own picture for final judgment. And here is something worth knowing: **outside the mouth of Jesus in the Gospels, this is the only time that word appears in the entire New Testament.** Jacob is the only other writer who reaches for his brother’s most terrible word — and he spends it on gossip. Last week in *Hidden Things* we saw why: the desire is genuinely ours, but there are powers in the unseen realm who know exactly which loose word will set a family, or a church, on fire.

Then he changes the picture from fire to venom: “a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” Fire is loud, and everyone sees it. Poison is quiet. It goes in with a smile, in a lowered voice, prefaced by “I’m only telling you so you can pray about it.” And it kills just as dead.

Proverbs 18:21 (LXX & ESV)

θάνατος και ζωή ἐν χειρὶ γλώσσης·

“Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.”

The Greek is literally “in the hand of the tongue” — the Septuagint keeps the Hebrew idiom (bēyad, “by the hand of”) rather than smoothing it to “power.” The tongue is pictured as holding death and life in its grip. Jacob grew up on this book.

Now Jacob puts his finger on the exact place it hurts:

“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.”

Do you see the trap he has sprung? He does not say “you curse *sinners*.” He says you curse **people who are made in the likeness of God** — borrowing the exact wording of Genesis 1:26 from the Greek Scriptures he read. So the blessing and the cursing are not two unrelated activities. **They are aimed at the same target.** The person you just took apart in the parking lot was made in the likeness of the God you were singing to twenty minutes ago.

Then he says something small that carries unusual weight: “**My brothers, these things ought not to be so.**” The word for “ought” is *chrē* (χρή) — the only time it appears in the New Testament. It is not the ordinary word for obligation. It is closer to “*this does not belong; this is against the nature of the thing.*” He is not scolding. He is pointing at something that has come apart.

And that is why he goes straight to nature. A spring does not pour fresh water on Sunday and salt water on Thursday. A fig tree does not have olive days. **In God’s creation, what comes out is determined by what is in there.** Every farmer in his audience knew it. Every one of us knows it.

So when the bitter water comes up out of us — and it does — Jacob’s diagnosis is not “you have a mouth problem.” It is: **check the spring.**

Chapter three is the longest treatment, but there are three more places where Jacob will not leave our speech alone — and together they cover just about every way a mouth can go wrong.

1. Speed — James 1:19–20 (ESV)

“Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.”

Three commands, in that order, and the order is the sermon. Almost every word we regret was born from running the sequence backwards. And notice how honest verse 20 is: your anger may be completely justified — and it still will not produce the righteousness of God. Being right has never once sanctified being cruel.

2. Slander — James 4:11–12 (ESV)

“Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?”

The Greek is *katalaleō* (καταλαλέω) — to talk *down* about someone when they are not in the room. And Jacob’s argument is stunning: when you do it, you have not merely broken the royal law, **you have set yourself above it**. A man who judges the law is no longer a doer of it — he is sitting in the Judge’s chair. “Who are you?”

3. Spin — James 5:12 (ESV)

“But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your ‘yes’ be yes and your ‘no’ be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.”

This is his brother’s teaching from the Sermon on the Mount, almost word for word (Matthew 5:37). The point was never a rule about oath formulas. It is that **a person**

who has to swear to be believed has already admitted his ordinary word is not reliable. Elaborate assurances are the tax we pay on a reputation for shading the truth.

Here is the sentence that decides whether this sermon does you any good: “**no human being can tame the tongue.**”

Every kind of beast and bird and reptile and sea creature has been tamed by mankind. We put lions in harness and taught parrots to talk. We have not managed the four inches inside our own faces. So if you leave here with nothing but a resolution to try harder — count to ten, bite your tongue — you will be back where you started before the week is out. Jacob is not handing us a technique. He is closing a door so we will look for the right one. Because his brother had already told him where the words come from:

Matthew 12:34–37 (ESV)

“You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

“Out of the abundance of the heart” — out of the *overflow*, out of what the heart has too much of to hold in. That is why a slip of the tongue is so humiliating: it was not a slip. It was a leak. The pressure was already there.

The cure for the mouth is never at the mouth. You do not fix a well by wiping the bucket. **Fix the spring, and the bucket comes up clean.** And there is only One who can go down into a heart and change what is in it.

So Jacob does not end chapter three at verse twelve. He ends it with two kinds of wisdom — and it is no accident at all that this is where a chapter about the tongue lands.

James 3:13–18 (ESV)

“Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom... 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.”

Look at how he answers “who is wise among you?” He does not say *let him explain it to us*. He says **let him show it — by his good conduct, and in meekness**. In Jacob’s church, wisdom was not something you proved by winning the argument. It was something you proved by how you treated the person you were arguing with.

And the source is the whole point: this wisdom **comes down**. It is not manufactured or self-taught. That is exactly where he started the letter: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach” (James 1:5). So the answer to a mouth we cannot tame is not more effort at the mouth. It is a heart we did not make, given by a God we ask.

A PRAYER TO PRAY THIS WEEK

Θοῦ, κύριε, φυλακὴν τῷ στόματί μου καὶ θύραν περιοχῆς περὶ τὰ χεῖλη μου.

“Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!” —

Psalms 141:3 (MT/LXX 140:3)

Jacob will not let us leave with a theory. His whole letter is one long refusal to let hearing substitute for doing: “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (James 1:22). So take it home in his own terms.

Listen to yourself for one week. Not to your intentions — to your actual sentences. What does the way you talk about people say is in the spring?

Fix the order. Quick to hear. Slow to speak. Slow to anger. When you catch yourself running it backwards, stop mid-sentence. Nobody ever regretted the reply they didn’t send.

Go back to the room where you said it. Not to explain what you meant — to own what you said. Confession is how the hidden thing comes into the light (1 John 1:9).

Ask for the wisdom you lack. He gives generously to all without reproach — and He will not think less of you for needing it.

Bless the image. This week, say out loud to one person the true good thing you have only ever thought about them. The same mouth that can curse God’s image can build it.

SO WHAT?

Your words are not a small part of your discipleship — they are the readout. You cannot fake a spring. And the man telling you this once stood in his own brother’s hometown and did not believe Him — until the risen Christ came and found him, and made him whole. If God can change what came out of Jacob’s mouth, He can

change what comes out of yours. Ask Him. He gives generously to all without reproach.

AFTER THE SERMON — AUTHOR & AUDIENCE

Every book of Scripture was written by *someone*, to *someone*, in a real moment of history — and we read it better when we know that moment. What follows is the background to this letter: the man's name and why our Bibles change it, his life and his death, when and to whom he wrote, what shaped his thinking, and how the letter came to sit in our canon. The Septuagint (LXX) and ESV are set beside the Greek throughout, as we do across the Discipleship School.

The name at the head of this letter is **Ἰάκωβος** (*Iakōbos*). In Hebrew that is יַעֲקֹב (*Ya‘aqov*) — the name of the patriarch, the third of the fathers, the man who wrestled with God at Peniel. The Hebrew name is bound up with the word for “heel” and “to supplant,” from the grip on Esau’s heel at birth (Genesis 25:26). Every Jewish parent who named a son *Ya‘aqov* in the first century was naming him after Israel himself.

Genesis 25:26 (LXX & ESV)

καὶ μετὰ τοῦτο ἐξῆλθεν ὁ ἀδελφὸς αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἡ χεὶρ αὐτοῦ ἐπειλημμένη τῆς πτέρνης ἦσαν· καὶ ἐκάλεσεν τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἰακώβ.

“Afterward his brother came out with his hand holding Esau’s heel, so his name was called Jacob.”

A detail worth seeing in the Greek: the New Testament actually distinguishes two forms. The *patriarch* is always **Ἰακώβ** (*Iakōb*) — the indeclinable Hebrew form carried straight over from the Septuagint. The *living men* who bear the name are **Ἰάκωβος** (*Iakōbos*) — the same name given a Greek ending so it can decline like an ordinary Greek noun. Compare Matthew 1:2 (Ἰακώβ, the patriarch) with Matthew 4:21 (Ἰάκωβος, the son of Zebedee). It is the same name in two dresses.

So how did *Iakōbos* become *James*? Through Latin, not through English. The Vulgate rendered it *Iacobus*. In later spoken Latin the hard *b* softened toward an *m* in some regions, giving the form *Iacomus*; that passed into Old French as *James*, and into English from there. The route is Hebrew → Greek → Latin → French → English, and it lost a syllable and swapped a consonant on the way.

A common claim, corrected: you will sometimes hear that King James I had the translators change “Jacob” to “James” to flatter himself. **That is not so.** The English form “James” was in the English Bible long before 1611 — Tyndale’s New Testament of 1526 already reads “James,” and the form was ordinary English usage well before that. The 1611 translators simply kept the name their readers already used. The interesting fact is not a royal conspiracy; it is that our Bibles quietly use two different English names for one Hebrew name, and the Jewishness of this man gets a little blurred in the process.

That is why, in this study, we will often call him **Jacob**. Not to be clever — but because it puts him back where he belongs: a Galilean Jew named after the patriarch, writing to Jewish believers, quoting the Law and the Prophets, thinking in Hebrew categories.

WHICH JACOB? — SORTING OUT THE NEW TESTAMENT

The name was extremely common, and the New Testament has several men who carry it. Keeping them straight is the first step to reading this letter well.

WHO	WHERE	WHAT WE KNOW
Jacob son of Zebedee brother of John	Mark 3:17; Acts 12:2	One of the Twelve, in the inner three with Peter and John. Beheaded by Herod Agrippa I about A.D. 44 — the first apostle martyred. He died too early to have written this letter.
Jacob son of Alphaeus	Mark 3:18; Acts 1:13	One of the Twelve. Nothing else is recorded of him. Possibly the same as “James the younger” (Mark 15:40).
Jacob the father of Judas not Iscariot	Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13	Known only as a name in the apostolic list.
Jacob the brother of the Lord	Mark 6:3; Galatians 1:19	The author of this letter. Not one of the Twelve. Leader of the Jerusalem church. Called by the early church “Jacob the Just.”

One more note: Jude opens his letter as “a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James” (Jude 1) — that is, the brother of *this* Jacob, and therefore another of the Lord’s brothers named in Mark 6:3. Two brothers of Jesus wrote books of our New Testament, and neither of them opened by claiming the relationship.

We can put his story together from Acts and Paul's letters, and it is one of the most remarkable in the New Testament precisely because it starts so badly.

He grew up with Jesus and did not believe Him. Mark 6:3 names him among the Lord's brothers; Mark 3:21 records the family going out to seize Jesus, saying "He is out of his mind"; John 7:5 says flatly, "For not even his brothers believed in him."

The risen Christ appeared to him personally. 1 Corinthians 15:7 — "Then he appeared to James." Paul lists it among the resurrection appearances he received as settled tradition. Whatever happened in that meeting is not recorded; the result is.

He is in the upper room. Acts 1:14 — the apostles were "devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers."

Paul meets him on his first visit to Jerusalem, about three years after the Damascus road. Galatians 1:19 — "But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother."

He is the man to notify. When Peter is freed from Herod's prison, his instruction is "Tell these things to James and to the brothers" (Acts 12:17). Leadership in Jerusalem has already shifted toward him.

He gives the deciding word at the Jerusalem Council. Acts 15:13–21 — after Peter and Barnabas and Paul speak, Jacob renders the judgment that Gentiles are not to be burdened with circumcision. He quotes Amos 9:11–12 *in its Septuagint form*, which is worth noticing in a room full of Jewish elders.

Paul names him first among the pillars. Galatians 2:9 — “James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars.”

Paul reports to him at the end. Acts 21:18 — on Paul’s last visit to Jerusalem, “Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.”

For roughly two decades this man held together the mother church of all Christianity — through famine, poverty, and mounting hostility — and he did it as a peacemaker, holding Jewish believers and Gentile believers in one body when it would have been far easier to let them split. That is the man writing to you about the tongue. He had used his own to hold a church together.

Read the letter with the Jerusalem church's actual circumstances in view and its emphases stop looking random.

Poverty and famine. Acts 11:28 records a famine over the Roman world in the reign of Claudius, and the Antioch church sending relief to the brothers in Judea. Paul spent years collecting money for “the poor among the saints at Jerusalem” (Romans 15:26). *That is why James talks about the poor on nearly every page* — the rich man in fine clothing (2:1–7), the brother without daily food (2:15–16), the withheld wages of the harvesters (5:4). These were not illustrations. They were his congregation.

Persecution. Stephen is stoned (Acts 7), the church is scattered (Acts 8:1), Herod kills the other Jacob with the sword (Acts 12:2). Believers who remained Jewish were under real pressure from the establishment in Jerusalem. Hence chapter one opens on trials, and chapter five closes on patient endurance “until the coming of the Lord.”

Division by wealth. When the poor are that poor and the rich are in the same assembly, the seating chart becomes a theology (James 2:2–4). Jacob will not allow it.

Jacob was killed in Jerusalem around A.D. 62. We have two ancient accounts, and it is worth being clear about which is stronger.

Josephus — the earlier and firmer source

The Jewish historian Josephus (*Antiquities* 20.200) reports that when the Roman governor Festus died and his successor Albinus had not yet arrived, the high priest **Ananus** seized the interval, convened the Sanhedrin, and had put to death “the brother of Jesus who was called Christ, whose name was James,” along with others — by stoning, on a charge of breaking the law. Josephus adds that the more fair-minded citizens of the city objected, and Ananus was deposed from the high priesthood for it. Josephus was a Jewish historian with no interest in promoting Christians, which is exactly what makes his testimony valuable.

Hegesippus, preserved by Eusebius — later, and more embellished

Writing perhaps a century after the event, Hegesippus (quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 2.23) gives a fuller and more dramatic account: Jacob is called “**the Just**,” a man so constantly on his knees in the temple praying for the people that his knees grew hard as a camel’s; he is set on the pinnacle of the temple and asked to talk the crowd out of following Jesus, testifies to Christ instead, is thrown down, and is finally clubbed to death by a fuller’s staff while praying “Father, forgive them.” This is a beautiful tradition and it may well preserve genuine memory — the nickname “the Just” is widely attested — but it is much later than Josephus, and the details cannot be verified. **We hand it on as tradition, and we say so.**

Both accounts agree on the essentials: he was killed in Jerusalem, by the priestly establishment, for his allegiance to Jesus, in the early sixties — only a few years before the city itself fell. The man who wrote “count it all joy... when you meet trials of various kinds” was not writing theory.

James 1:1 (Greek & ESV)

Ἰάκωβος θεοῦ καὶ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ δοῦλος ταῖς δώδεκα φυλαῖς ταῖς ἐν τῇ διασπορᾷ χαίρειν.

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.”

The audience. “The twelve tribes in the *diaspora*” — Jewish believers in Jesus living outside the land of Israel. Many of them may be the very people scattered by the persecution that followed Stephen’s death (Acts 8:1; 11:19), which would make Jacob their pastor writing to a flock he had lost to the roads. He addresses them the way a Jew addresses Jews: he calls their meeting a *synagogue* (2:2, the plain sense of the Greek), he assumes the Law, he cites Abraham, Rahab, Job, and Elijah without explanation.

The date. It must be before his death around A.D. 62. Many hold it is very early — possibly the *earliest* document in the New Testament, from the mid-forties — on the grounds that Jacob never mentions the Gentile controversy that dominated the church from Acts 15 onward, never addresses circumcision or food laws, and describes a very simple community life. Others place it later in his ministry. The early date is a strong argument from silence, but it is still an argument from silence; we hold it as likely rather than certain.

The Greek. Here is an honest difficulty: the Greek of this letter is polished — a wide vocabulary, careful rhythm, real rhetorical skill. Some ask whether a Galilean tradesman could write it. Two things are worth saying. First, Galilee was thoroughly bilingual, and Nazareth sat within a few miles of the Greek-speaking city of Sepphoris. Second, letters in this world were routinely composed with a trained secretary (an *amanuensis*) — Paul used one openly (Romans 16:22). Neither point settles the question, but neither does the objection.

The genre. It opens like a letter and then stops behaving like one. There is no closing greeting, no travel plans, no named recipients, no single church's problem being solved. What we actually have is **wisdom** — a string of short, hard-hitting speeches, each largely self-contained, each usually landing on a memorable line, all stitched together by repeated keywords rather than by a linear argument. By the common count there are some fifty-nine imperatives in one hundred and eight verses. This book was built to be preached, memorized, and obeyed.

WHAT SHAPED HIS THINKING — JESUS AND PROVERBS

Two streams run through everything Jacob writes. The first is his brother's teaching — above all the Sermon on the Mount. The astonishing thing is that **Jacob never once quotes Jesus by name**, and mentions Him only twice in the whole letter (1:1 and 2:1) — and yet the Sermon on the Mount is on nearly every page. He does not cite his brother. He *thinks* like him.

JAMES	SERMON ON THE MOUNT	THE SHARED IDEA
1:2 — count it all joy when you meet trials	Matthew 5:11–12	Rejoice under persecution
1:4 — that you may be perfect (<i>teleioi</i>)	Matthew 5:48	Be <i>teleioi</i> as your Father is
1:5 — let him ask God	Matthew 7:7	Ask, and it will be given to you
1:22 — be doers of the word	Matthew 7:24–27	The wise man <i>does</i> the words
2:5 — the poor, rich in faith, heirs of the kingdom	Matthew 5:3	Blessed are the poor
2:13 — mercy triumphs over judgment	Matthew 5:7	Blessed are the merciful
3:18 — sown in peace by those who make peace	Matthew 5:9	Blessed are the peacemakers
4:11 — do not speak evil, do not judge	Matthew 7:1–2	Judge not, that you be not judged
5:2 — your riches have rotted, garments moth-eaten	Matthew 6:19	Lay not up treasure where moth destroys
5:12 — let your 'yes' be yes	Matthew 5:34–37	Do not take an oath at all

The second stream is **the wisdom literature** — Proverbs above all, and the poems of Proverbs 1–9 in particular, where Wisdom is a voice calling in the street and the choice is between two roads. Jacob’s method is the method of Proverbs: short sayings, vivid images from ordinary life (a horse, a boat, a spark, a spring, a fig tree, a mirror, a wildflower in the heat), aimed not at your information but at your feet.

And he quotes the Greek Old Testament. At James 4:6 he cites Proverbs 3:34 — and he follows the Septuagint, not the Hebrew.

Proverbs 3:34 (LXX)

Κύριος ὑπερηφάνοις ἀντιτάσσεται, ταπεινοῖς δὲ δίδωσιν χάριν.

“Toward the scorers he is scornful, but to the humble he gives favor.” (ESV, rendering the Hebrew)

These are genuinely different sentences. The Hebrew says God *scorns the scorers*; the Greek says “**God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble**” — and that Greek line is what James 4:6 quotes (changing only “Lord” to “God”), and what Peter quotes too (1 Peter 5:5). We say that plainly rather than papering over it: the apostles read and preached from the Septuagint, and a familiar sentence of ours entered the New Testament through the Greek translation rather than the Hebrew.

One more strand: Jewish wisdom writing between the Testaments had already worked this exact ground. Sirach devotes a long passage to the destructive power of the tongue — slander as a scourge, the tongue as a fire, and the counsel to make a door and a bolt for your mouth (Sirach 28:12–26). Jacob is standing in a long line of Jewish teachers on this subject, and he knows it.

If you want one word to carry the letter in your pocket, take this one. The *teleios* (τέλειος) word-group runs from the first chapter to the third. Watch the Greek rather than the English, because our translations render it several different ways:

1:4 — “let steadfastness have its full effect (*ergon teleion*), that you may be *perfect* (*teleioi*) and complete, lacking in nothing” — the root twice in one verse

1:17 — “every good gift and every *perfect* gift is from above”

1:25 — “the *perfect* law, the law of liberty”

2:8 — “if you really *fulfill* (*teleite*) the royal law” — the verb of the same family

2:22 — “faith was *completed* (*eteleiōthē*) by his works”

3:2 — “if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a *perfect* man”

In the Greek Old Testament, *teleios* is one of the words used for Hebrew *tamim* — whole, sound, unblemished, all of a piece. It is what Noah was (Genesis 6:9), and what Israel was commanded to be:

Deuteronomy 18:13 (LXX & ESV)

τέλειος ἔση ἐναντίον κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ σου.

“You shall be blameless before the LORD your God.”

That is the same Greek word Jesus uses to close the Sermon on the Mount — “*You therefore must be perfect (teleioi), as your heavenly Father is perfect*” (Matthew 5:48) — and the same word Jacob picks up in 1:4 and lands on in 3:2. Deuteronomy to

the Sermon on the Mount to the tongue. **Wholeness is the aim, and the mouth is where the fracture shows.**

A WORD ON FAITH AND WORKS

No one gets through James without the question. “Faith apart from works is dead” (2:26) sits beside Paul’s “one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Romans 3:28), and the two have been set against each other for centuries.

They are answering different questions. **Paul is answering: how does a sinner get right with God?** Answer: “by grace you have been saved through faith... not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9). **Jacob is answering: how do you tell the difference between real faith and a claim to have faith?**

Answer: look at what it produced. Jacob is not adding a second requirement to salvation; he is denying that a faith which changes nothing was ever the article in question. His test case is a man who says “Go in peace, be warmed and filled” to a brother with no coat and no dinner (2:15–16). That is not a doctrinal error. It is an absence of the thing itself.

Both men, tellingly, reach for the same proof text — “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness” (James 2:23; Romans 4:3, both quoting Genesis 15:6) — and both are quoting it in the Septuagint’s wording. They are not rival schools. They are two sides of one coin, and the letter you are holding is the side that asks whether it shows up on Monday.

HOW THE LETTER CAME TO US

James had a slower road into the canon than the Gospels or Paul's major letters, and it is better to know that than to be startled by it later.

Eusebius (early fourth century) lists James among the *antilegomena* — the “spoken against” books, widely used and read in most churches but still disputed by some (*Church History* 3.25). The doubts were mostly about authorship, not content.

By the end of the fourth century the question was settled in both East and West, and James stands in the canonical lists of Athanasius (A.D. 367) and the councils that followed.

Luther famously called it “an epistle of straw” compared with the books that preach Christ most plainly — a remark from his 1522 preface to the New Testament, which he quietly dropped from later editions. He kept translating it, printing it, and preaching from it.

We hold it as Scripture — and we note the history honestly, because a faith that has to hide the paper trail is not the faith of a man who told us to let our yes be yes.

And one difference you can see with your own eyes, if you read from the King James: at James 3:9 the KJV reads “therewith bless we *God*, even the Father,” while the ESV reads “we bless our *Lord* and Father.” That is not a translators’ preference — it is a real difference in the Greek manuscripts (τοῦ θεοῦ in the later Byzantine copies the KJV followed, τοῦ κυρίου in the earliest ones). We name it rather than quietly picking one and hoping nobody notices. Nothing in the sermon turns on it: either way, the same mouth is blessing the Father and cursing His image.

FOR DISCUSSION & REFLECTION

1. Jacob picks a bit, a rudder, and a spark. What is the difference between the first two and the third — and which one describes your speech in an average week?

2. He says “no human being can tame the tongue.” Why does he close that door before he offers any help? What would be wrong with a sermon that stopped at “try harder”?

3. Read James 3:9 next to Genesis 1:26. How does remembering the image of God in a person change the way you would have spoken about them last week?

4. “Quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.” Which of the three do you break first, and what usually happens next?

5. Jacob’s test for a wise person is not what he knows but how he treats people while he disagrees with them (3:13–18). Who in your life would pass that test? What do you notice about them?

6. This man grew up with Jesus and did not believe Him, and later died for Him. What does his story say to you about someone in your family you have given up on?

The threads in this sermon — the heart behind the words, the wholeness God is after, the sources our English Bible came through, and the wisdom that must be given rather than earned — each open into a fuller study. Keep growing:

THE WEEK BEFORE

Hidden Things

James 1:14–15 preached from Joshua 7 — how sin grows in the dark, and the God who brings hidden things to light so we will confess and live.

A NEW HEART

Born From Above

“Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” — and the new heart only God can give. Ezekiel 36 and John 3 on the birth from above.

THE HIDDEN COUNTRY

Third World Souls

Check the spring, not the bucket. The renovation of the heart, the Gift that cancels the debt, and the forgiveness that overflows onto everyone you know.

BECOMING WHOLE

Spiritual Formation — The Steps

Making disciples, not merely converts: Vision, Intention, and Means — how a fractured person is actually made *teleios*.

WHY THE GREEK

Septuagint (LXX) & ESV Bible Study

Why James quotes Proverbs 3:34 in a form your Old Testament doesn't read — and why we always set the Greek beside the English.

GO DEEPER

Deep Research

Author and audience, original context, and verse-by-verse study using the full research method.

“From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.”

James 3:10 (ESV)

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Greek Old Testament citations are from the Septuagint (LXX).

Pleasant Springs Church • ps-church.com/sermons • August 2, 2026