

Sermon Summary | Sunday 15th February 2026 | James 3.1-18

James 3.1–18 is about the power of words and the kind of wisdom that shapes a church's culture. A church can become like a greenhouse: a place where faith grows, weak believers are strengthened, sinners can repent safely, and the weary are refreshed. Or it can become like a furnace: a place where people are scorched by criticism, sarcasm, suspicion, private grumbling, careless comments, and constant fault-finding. James shows that the environment of a church is shaped more than we often admit by the words spoken within it.

First, James speaks about why leaders' words matter. "Not many of you should become teachers," he says, because those who teach will be judged with greater strictness. Teaching is not bad, but it is weighty. Words spoken in Christ's name shape souls, form consciences, affect people's view of God, and can either strengthen or confuse faith. That is why preaching must never be treated as a platform for self-expression. It is a trust. The point is not to put teachers on a pedestal, but to place them under the seriousness of God's judgment. James himself speaks with a pastoral "we": "we who teach." Teachers must be humble because they too stumble in many ways.

But James does not stop with teachers, because everyone speaks. If God holds teachers to stricter account because words are powerful, then none of us can treat words lightly. The tongue may be small, but its consequences are enormous. James uses vivid images: a bit in a horse's mouth, a rudder on a ship, and a small spark that sets a forest ablaze. A single sentence can change the atmosphere of a home, colour someone's experience of church, or take years to undo.

James then says that no human being can tame the tongue. This is not a call to give up, but to recognise that the problem is deeper than technique or willpower. Speech reveals the source of the heart. With the same tongue we bless God and curse people made in his likeness. James says this should not be. A spring cannot pour out both fresh and salt water, and a fig tree cannot bear olives. Our speech is diagnostic: what comes out reveals what is within.

This means our words can make the church either a furnace or a greenhouse. Furnace words include cynical commentary, gossip disguised as concern, habitual venting, backchannel criticism, and the cold withholding of warmth. James warns us not to spread criticism sideways, but either to take concerns to God in prayer or to the right person in humility. Churches rarely become furnaces through one dramatic explosion; often it happens through a thousand small sparks.

By contrast, greenhouse words strengthen faith. They may be simple: "It is good to see you," "How are you, actually?" "I thanked God for you," or "May I pray for you now?" This is not extroversion; it is love. During the week, a message, phone call, note, or specific encouragement can do enormous good. In prayer meetings, simple, honest, Christ-centred prayers train the church in hope. In difficult conversations, wisdom speaks truth with gentleness, aiming not to win but to build.

Finally, James shows that wisdom determines our culture. True wisdom is not proved by claims, credentials, or intelligence, but by a life marked by meekness: strength under control, humility with courage. Worldly wisdom brings jealousy, selfish ambition, disorder, and division. It can enter church life through status-thinking, consumer habits, political manoeuvring, quick opinions, grievance culture, and self-protection. If we import worldly wisdom, we should not be surprised by worldly fruit.

Wisdom from above is different. It is pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. It produces a harvest of righteousness sown in peace. Yet James is not merely saying, "Try harder with your words." Our hope is Christ. Jesus is the truly wise man. His words were never careless. He spoke truth without cruelty and grace without compromise. He endured slander, mockery, and false accusation, and died for people whose mouths have not

matched their worship. He forgives sins of speech and changes the source of speech by giving us new hearts and his Spirit. In him, our words can increasingly become instruments of peace, life, and growth.

Questions for personal reflection

1. Are my words currently helping to make my home, church, or relationships more like a greenhouse where faith can grow — or more like a furnace where people are scorched?
2. Where do I need to repent of worldly patterns in my speech — criticism, sarcasm, gossip, defensiveness, or silence — and ask Christ to form wisdom from above in me?