

Scripture: James 3:1-12

Title: double-minded, double-tongued / Translated by YeaEun Han

1. The Brother Who Returned to His Father's House

If you look at Luke 15, the story of the prodigal son who returns appears. Because I also have an older brother and I am the second son, there are times when I immerse myself a bit more in this story when thinking about it. My older brother also lives a more upright life than I do, just like the older son in the story. If a prodigal son were to emerge between the two of us, it definitely would have been me. In the story of the prodigal son, the father welcomes the prodigal son who returned to his house with open arms. This story is a story of the father's unconditional hospitality. The second son was lonely. Because the connections the second son had formed were through money, when the money disappeared, they were all severed. The second son had a strong desire to be connected. It was the desire to meet deeply with other people, to be connected, and to be linked together again. You could say he wanted to be accepted just as he was. That is why he headed to his father's house. It is the same for us. All those who live as immigrants are lonely. Foreigners living abroad have a stronger desire to be connected than when they were back in Korea. The prodigal son's father accepts his son just as he is. Accepting someone just as they are is hospitality. Unlike the father, the older brother could not accept his younger brother just as he was. He failed to show hospitality to his younger brother. Not only did he hate the younger brother who had come back after squandering the father's wealth, but he hated the father who welcomed that younger brother even more. It seems he didn't even want to be connected to his younger brother and rather wanted to sever the connection entirely.

Why do we call the church a family community? We are all people who have returned to God the Father. Because we have returned to God the Father, we are one family. God desires that we accept each other just as we are within the church community. We cannot all be exactly the same. We are all different. Hospitality is when differences are acknowledged and someone is accepted just as they are. There are always wanderers that come and go at church. Wanderers are bound to drop by unexpectedly. There are people who stay for a while and then leave. The fact that we must become a community of hospitality means that, no matter what situation we meet someone in, we recognize them as a person sent by God and treat them warmly. This is true not only in the church but also in your daily lives. It is God's desire to recognize the strangers who unexpectedly drop into my life as people sent by God and to show them hospitality. The gift given to us to create such a community of hospitality is precisely words. Words are a gift God has given us to accept others and convey warmth to them.

2. The Gift Given to Those Who Resemble God, Words

If you look at verse 9, "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness," the expression 'human beings, who have been made in God's likeness' appears. God also used words to connect. God desired to connect with humans through words. In Genesis 1, God created this world with the Word. Genesis 1 shows how powerful words are. When He said, "Let there be light!" light came into being. He created humans with the Word and formed relationships with humans through the Word. The fact that we are created in the image of God means that we are beings who

communicate using words and beings who can relate using words. Genesis 1 shows us from the beginning how powerful words are. Books like Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes are called the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. The Book of James is called the wisdom literature of the New Testament, carrying on the tradition of these Old Testament wisdom books. In particular, in Proverbs, proverbs about words make up over 20% of the entire book. It is the same with the Book of James emphasizing the use of language. That's because it dedicates most of chapter 3 to the use of language. Chapter 1 of James is the introduction and acts almost like a blueprint for the remaining chapters. James is unpacking in earnest in Chapter 3 the concept already mentioned in Chapter 1 Verse 26, that faith accompanied by action is faith that controls the tongue.

3. Do Not Become Teachers

Beginning with wisdom regarding words, James first urges us not to become teachers. The attitude of constantly trying to instruct others is often called "acting like a teacher." He warns against this, stating that those who teach will be judged more strictly. In light of this, pastors, whose main profession is teaching, must be especially careful. Because they can mislead people with the wrong words, they will face a harsher judgment. As I mentioned last week, it was no easy task for Christians living under the Roman Empire to maintain their faith identity. They were inevitably faced with trials and tribulations—trials that arose from serving one God instead of two masters. Many ended up being swept away by the narrative of the empire, which appeared much more powerful than the narrative of the Kingdom of God. For those caught up in the empire's mainstream narrative, self-proclaimed teachers emerged, claiming, "I have wisdom and knowledge."

In other words, there were people who set themselves up as teachers and tried to instruct others. The letters of Paul, Peter, James, and John can all be seen as providing wisdom on how to overcome the identity crises and community challenges brought on by these trials. James insists that there shouldn't be many people in the community trying to act as teachers. When everyone tries to teach, the community falls into crisis. He is warning us of the danger of believing that our own thoughts are inherently right, and that our own wisdom and knowledge are entirely rational and sound.

Consider Matthew 12:36-37: "But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned." This verse serves as a stark warning of how careful we must be with our words.

4. The Destructive Power of Words (Small But Strong, a Part But Can Destroy the Whole)

To support his warning about careful language use, James highlights the destructive power of words. The tongue is small, but it can ruin the entire body. When James says that this small body part can burn the whole body, he means that the misuse of language can cause an entire community to collapse. To tame a horse, we put a bit in its mouth. Using that small bit, we can steer the horse's entire body. Just as a small rudder is used to maneuver a massive ship, the words that come out of our mouths may seem small, but they have a massive impact on the entire community.

He tells us to consider how a tiny spark can set an entire mountain ablaze. Because Minnesota lacks mountains, wildfires might feel unfamiliar, but back when I lived in California, they were a frequent reality. There were times when the entire city of LA was covered in hazy smoke due to these fires. Every massive wildfire starts with a single small spark or a discarded cigarette butt. Even in my childhood, I played with fire a lot. On the first full moon of the lunar year, we would play *Jwibulnori*. We would poke holes into empty formula cans to make "fire cans," place burning branches inside, and spin them around, engaging in fire fights. Getting our hair singed was a regular occurrence, and we often accidentally set fire to stacked bundles of straw. Sometimes, the sparks thrown by kids would spread to the mountains and start a forest fire. Because of this, I know from personal experience that a single spark can burn down a mountain.

The tongue is just one part of the body, yet it moves the whole body. It seems small, but it holds the destructive power to bring the entire body down. Verse 6 states that the tongue sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by Gehenna. "Gehenna" comes from the Hebrew "Ge Hinnom" (the Valley of Hinnom), signifying a place of judgment. In Aramaic, it became the word for hell. This implies that when the tongue is misused, a hell-like reality can unfold right here. The phrase "course of one's life" translates from the Greek referring to the "wheel of genesis" (or existence, nature, the created world). The idea that the tongue can set the entire created world ablaze is translated here as setting the wheel of life on fire. It means words possess enough destructive power to ruin all of creation.

If you look at Genesis 3, you see the snake's words and Eve's words bringing down the pristine created world God had made. This is why the event in Genesis 3 is called the Fall. The snake planted doubt in God's word, and Eve, deceived by those words, passed that temptation on to her husband. Through mere words, the entire created world collapsed. Words are truly that terrifying and hold that much destructive power. The world was originally created by the Word, but it was also brought down by words coming from the mouths of the snake and Eve.

5. Do Not Speak Two Different Things From One Mouth

All creatures made by God can be tamed by human beings, but the tongue is something no human can tame. Verse 8 explains why: it is a restless evil, constantly in motion. Notice how the tongue is described as a deadly poison. This means that if used incorrectly, the tongue becomes a lethal toxin that can literally kill a person. There is an old Korean proverb that says, "There is poison under the tongue." Today, we frequently see news of celebrities taking their own lives over a single malicious comment. Historically, Korean parents have been infamous for their harsh words, sometimes hurling unspeakable curses at their children, such as "Go out and die." Words carelessly thrown by parents can pierce a child's heart and torment them for a lifetime. I once heard a story about someone whose younger sibling drowned while they were swimming in a neighborhood stream. Hearing their father say, "You should have died instead," pierced the surviving child's heart, leading to a lifelong struggle with severe social phobia. Words are not only powerful, but their effects also last a very long time. There is a saying: "30 seconds on the lips, 30 years in the heart." This perfectly illustrates the lifespan of a single spoken word. A child who repeatedly hears, "You good-for-nothing brat," may spend their entire life unable to erase the belief that they are useless. Some even end their lives over such words. A single phrase has

the power to completely uproot and alter a person's trajectory. Just as good words have the power to heal and build, bad words have the power to destroy an entire life.

By comparing the mouth to a spring, James emphasizes that two contradictory things should not come from the same source. We use the tongue to praise our Lord and Father, but we also use it to curse human beings made in His image. This creates a terrible contradiction: praise and cursing flowing from the same mouth. The original Greek word for cursing literally means 'to send far away, to put away, or to remove.' Conversely, the word for praise is *Eulogia*—derived from *eu* (good) and *logos* (word). With the same mouth, you can offer praise, yet also send your brothers and sisters into exile or ruin. It is a truly terrifying thought. Is it possible for both fresh water and bitter water to flow from the same spring? When it happens, it's as if there are two separate springs within one body. Interestingly, I've heard that humans have three pairs of major salivary glands around our mouths—six in total. Perhaps that is why such a wide, contradictory variety of words comes out of us!

Do you remember James 1:8? James previously mentioned a divided mind, which is the exact opposite of being whole and complete: "Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do." Just as the tongue moves restlessly and tears people down with its poison, two conflicting springs exist in the mouths of those who harbor a double mind. In James 4:8, he urges, "Purify your hearts, you double-minded." This is a call to maintain a pure heart so that filthy words and clean words do not pour from the same mouth simultaneously.

6. Words Return to Us Exactly as Fruit

As mentioned earlier, *Eulogia* combines the concepts of "good" and "word," translating to praise, compliment, blessing, and gift. The words that build up a community are precisely this *Eulogia*. Conversely, there are words that tear a community down. Our faith is starkly revealed through our language. We can gauge the maturity of a person's faith by the words they choose to use. We must cultivate the habit of speaking words of compliment, blessing, and grace that serve as gifts to others.

"The words you utter will bear fruit in your life exactly as they are spoken. The harsh words you spew at your children and colleagues will act as a boomerang, returning directly to you. Does this sound like an exaggeration? Look at Proverbs 18:21: "The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit." Doesn't this explicitly mean that our words become fruit, and we will reap exactly what we sow? Consider Psalm 109:17-18: "He loved to pronounce a curse—may it come back on him. He found no pleasure in blessing—may it be far from him. He wore cursing as his garment; it entered into his body like water, into his bones like oil." Words of blessing will return to you as a blessing. Naturally, words of cursing will return to you as a curse. We far too often fail to realize just how deeply important our language habits are.

7. Words That Build Up the Community

We must adopt the habit of speaking blessings rather than curses, which push people away and exile them. My hope is that only words of blessing, compliments, and grace will flow from our mouths. We must actively practice making *Eulogia* our default language habit. 1 Corinthians 13:11 says: "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me." A complete, mature faith is

marked by leaving the ways of childhood behind. Notice that Paul mentions 'talking' first. He is instructing us to discard childish speech. The maturation of our faith requires leaving childhood behind, and that process begins directly with the maturation of our words.

Paul also writes in Ephesians 4:29: "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." He commands us not to let a single rotten word escape our lips. We must throw away childish speech. Words born of envy, jealousy, and backbiting are the words of infants, and they destroy the community. In contrast to childish speech, Paul urges language that builds virtue and imparts grace. We must ensure that the habit of speaking words that build up the community and offer grace becomes fully ingrained in our character.

To speak this way, there is something we must do first: we must keep our hearts clean. Words are the direct fruit of the heart. The heart and the tongue are intimately connected; being double-minded is closely linked to being double-tongued. You cannot pick olives from a fig tree, nor can you harvest figs from a grapevine. If the heart is pure, pure words will naturally follow. Good fruit is borne from a good heart. When gratitude overflows within, words of gratitude will inevitably spill out. Our first priority must be examining our hearts to ensure they are pure. Since saltwater comes from a saltwater spring, and fresh water from a freshwater spring, you must constantly guard your heart. The Bible refers to serving two masters as being "double-minded." When we fix our eyes solely on God and pursue what brings Him joy, our minds will not be divided, and our tongues will remain undivided as well.

8. Concluding Words

I once shared with you that the beautiful values of the Kingdom of God must be held within the vessel we call community. James is delivering this wisdom with the community in mind. Today's text teaches us that proper language use is a vital piece of wisdom for keeping that community healthy. James warns that the toxic words from just one person's mouth can collapse an entire congregation. Because a tiny spark can burn down an entire forest, he pleads with us to tame our lips and build up the community through healthy speech. Through the habit of *Eulogia*, we can build up both the church and its people. Through praise, compliments, blessings, and gratitude, we establish a strong foundation. Do not neglect reflecting on your heart to ensure it does not become divided. Strive to keep unwholesome talk far from your lips. It is our Lord's deep desire that our community grows strong and healthy by consistently speaking words of goodness, virtue, and grace.