

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: October 23, 2022  
Sermon: "The Letter of David James"  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scriptures: James 1:12; James 1:26; James 2:14-17;  
James 3:5-6 - *read together:*

*Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.* (James 1:12)

*If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.* (James 1:26)

*What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.* (James 2:14-17)

*So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell.* (James 3:5-6)

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**“The Letter of David James”**

Sometimes, at a family gathering or social event, a person will run his or her fingers through gray hair, and someone will crack a joke about gray hair, and the person being singled out will say, “I earned every single one of these gray hairs!”

And that’s true of being an old fuddy duddy. When you’re 40 and somebody calls you an old fuddy duddy, it can feel insulting. But at this stage of my life, I’ve earned whatever fuddy duddy-ness, old foggy-ness I may be about to share with you in this sermon! That makes you excited about the next 15 minutes, doesn’t it?

For the last couple of months, our Church Bible Study has been working our way through the Letters of James. Half of the New Testament is made up of letters, “epistles,” written to churches and church leaders in the first century to guide them sometimes, correct them sometimes, encourage them all the time.

Paul, Peter, James all wrote letters. James was a bit of a scold. “Hate the world,” he tells us. “Faith without works is dead” is probably his most famous saying. And his advice about our mouth is basically “stuff it.”

Yet, behind even his most “drop-dead” statements, he’s pretty much on target, worth reading, worth discussing in Bible Study. In fact, that’s what led to this sermon. Our Bible Study discussions have been so robust, so wise, that I decided to share that wisdom with our whole Church. Which fits nicely because “Wisdom” is one of James’s main concerns.

By the way, who was James? Some think he was Jesus’s brother, or cousin, perhaps? And the first Bishop of Jerusalem. And his bones are buried in Spain, which is why we have the famous pilgrimage, “El Camino de Santiago,” (“the way of St. James”), from France, over the Pyrenees, to Santiago de Compostela.

By the time James wrote his letter, he was convinced the world was out of whack. And who could blame him? Jesus had been murdered. Christians were being hunted down. The Roman Empire was about to crush every opposition or independent thought on the way to its own decline. So his view of the world is harsh, his words strident, his zeal overbearing. And yet, mostly right: "Don't give up," he tells us. "Treat people right," "Trust in God," "Do the right thing."

So we've got Jimmy Valvano, Spike Lee, and the motto engraved on U.S. money, but James was saying that 2,000 years ago. He wasn't complicating religion with doctrine, he wasn't burying himself with hierarchy and power struggles. Instead, he was trying to help Christians imagine a church, create a church in the spirit of Christ. He wants us to be the best we can be.

The old, old Knute Rockne movie was on Friday night, with Ronald Reagan playing one of Rockne's Notre Dame football players, "The Gipper." Rockne was demanding, hard-driving no-nonsense emotional. That made Knute Rockne a legend and St. James a saint.

I think I can summarize James fairly easily. He's concerned with what goes into your head, what comes out of your mouth, and what you do with your freedom. Wisdom. Words. And deeds. Take care of those three, and you have what he calls real religion, "Religion that God accepts as pure."

Our most exciting conversation, believe it or not, was about "wisdom." What is it? Where do we get it? How do we know if it's any good? In fact, James is crystal clear: there's good wisdom, there's bad wisdom. He calls one "wisdom from above," and then there's wisdom that slouches around the dark corners of earthly life.

Our Bible Study group defined wisdom as what happens when you combine intelligence with love, when you factor in perspective and experience, when you bring together knowledge and understanding.

St. James would add, "It's what you *do* with intelligence, love, perspective, and experience, knowledge, and understanding that make it wisdom."

So one time, when I was a pastor in Massachusetts, I had to visit a guy in prison doing hard time, 25 years or so, maximum-security prison for armed robbery and pistol-whipping his victim. Somewhere in the conversation, I asked if he'd learned anything in prison.

"Oh, yeah," he says, "next time I do a robbery, I'll kill the guy. No witnesses, you might not get caught, plus you get parole earlier." Well, okay, that's wisdom, right? That's taking some lesson, experience, learning from it, applying it. James would call that "earthly wisdom," "unspiritual," he says, "selfish . . . bitter . . . of the devil . . . disorderly . . . an evil practice." It's still wisdom, but up to no good.

"Wisdom from above," James tells us, is a whole different ballgame. Such wisdom is pure, peaceful, considerate, merciful, fair, and genuine." What a great checklist! You and I take in information all the time from the full range of sources: TV, newspapers, books, movies, friends, media, celebrities, talking heads, experts, influencers, politicians, pundits.

They are giving some kind of understanding, imparting some version of knowledge, selling it as some type of wisdom. Fair enough. Now test it. Is it "pure"? No ego, no agenda, no ulterior motive? Is it "considered," in other words, thought through, reasoned out? Does it help bring people together? Is it constructive, positive? Does it do some good?

I like how James put it in James 3:13, "Who is wise and understanding among you? Then show it by a good life with good deeds done humbly."

That's the mark of wisdom, a good life full of good deeds done right. Do that, you're wise. Do bad deeds, do no deeds, waste your life,

misuse your life. That's not wise, no matter how much you think you know.

Having laid that groundwork of wisdom, James answers the age-old question that has tied religious people in knots forever: is it better to have good faith or do good works? Ritual or righteousness? Creed or deeds? Be right or do right?

Do you get into heaven by being a good guy? Or going to the right church? James couldn't be clearer: "Faith without works is dead," he declared. "You show me your faith without deeds, I will show you my faith by what I do." (James 2:17-18)

One of the things we "do" more than anything else is use our mouth, flap our lips, wag our tongue, talk, talk, talk, all kinds of talk, all kinds of ways, stringing words together. And a lot of it, says James, is bad, hurtful; and he goes so far as to say, downright evil.

"The tongue is a fire," James writes, "a restless evil, a deadly poison, it corrupts the whole person, it is a world of evil in our body." (James 3:6-8)

In my old neighborhood, as bad as some of us kids were, there were lines you didn't cross, things you didn't say, and if some kid on the block got too crass, too ugly with his words, we'd say, "You kiss your mother with that mouth?!"

James is equally blunt, "With this tongue we praise God and curse one another," he says, adding, "This should not be." Have some decorum, he's saying, show some class.

At my college you joined a fraternity freshman year but didn't move in until the next year. So you didn't get the full frat life experience until your sophomore fall semester. Then, well, you can imagine.

About two days before Thanksgiving break, a fraternity leader sat us down and said, "You're about to go home for the first time since living in a fraternity. So you need to watch your mouth, clean up

your act. You've been a pig for three months, but your mother doesn't know you're a pig. So, no cursing, and no vulgarity. Stop being gross. In fact, best advice, just shut your mouth for three days." What he was saying was you don't reveal to your parents what you've become. You don't want them to hear what you're really like!

There's a saying, "The eye is a window into the soul." James says, "No, your mouth is the window into your soul." If we are going to talk about good deeds and bad deeds, and good deeds being proof of wisdom, and good deeds being evidence of faith, and if most of our doing of anything starts with the mouth, then we need to get the mouth under control. James actually compares our mouth to a horse and a boat. Like a horse, we do need a bit in our mouth. Like a boat, we need a rudder to guide it. We need to "tame," he says, to "tame our mouths."

I'm hardly the first person to complain about the vulgarization of culture. Which began, believe it or not—check it out yourself—with taking the "Lord's name in vain," all the variations of God and Jesus and Christ, linked with other words; and then we got the "f" word and other four-letter words ubiquitous. And then the "n" word got mainstreamed, and nowadays every imaginable bodily function on the big screen and the little screen.

I told you this was my "old fuddy-duddy sermon." But bad words are not limited to cuss words. Lying is so dangerous to society that when God was trying to provide social order for the world with his Top Ten list of Commandments, "lying" is up there with murder and stealing. You can't have a functioning, stable society if you can't count on the truth being true.

And I'll bet you don't know this, but Jesus reserves his severest condemnation for people who use their mouth to insult. Look it up! Insulters, bad-mouthers, hurtful talkers "are in danger of hellfire," Jesus says. (Matthew 5:22)

He says that right after declaring that the problem with murder isn't murder, it's anger. Anger is the root cause of most violence, and anger mostly escalates from words to violence. Words lead to action. Wise words lead to good deeds. Good deeds prove your faith. Your faith gives you wisdom to lead your life.

So, let's see where we are. St. James is buried in Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain, and you can get there by walking 500 miles. Part of its popularity today is due to a wonderful movie, "The Way," starring Martin Sheen and written by his son, Emilio Estevez. The Sheen character is a grieving dad, walking the Camino, like so many pilgrims, seeking, well, "the way": Knowledge. Understanding. "Wisdom from above." Everything we've been talking about today.

That's what "Camino" means, "The Way." That actually was the original name for early Christianity: "The Way."

And that's what we still stand for: the way to knowledge, the way to live: watch your mouth . . . live your faith . . . be wise.

Our final hymn today is "Take My Life," No. 609 in your Hymnal (v. 1, 2, and 5)

*1. Take my life and let it be  
consecrated, Lord, to thee.  
Take my moments and my days;  
let them flow in endless praise,  
let them flow in endless praise.*

*2. Take my hands and let them move  
at the impulse of thy love.  
Take my feet and let them be  
swift and beautiful for thee,  
swift and beautiful for thee.*

*5. Take my will and make it thine;  
it shall be no longer mine.  
Take my heart it is thine own;  
it shall be thy royal throne,  
it shall be thy royal throne.*