Breathing Fire

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Preacher: Eric Scott

[0:00] This morning we continue our study of James as Eric takes us through chapter 3. The scripture is found in your bulletins, and if you'd like to follow along, I'll read from God's word. Not many of you should become teachers, my brother, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

For we all stumble in many, many ways. 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.
[1:18] 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. This is God's word.
Please be seated. Good morning. As you heard, we have a nice, bright, bubbly, happy passage today that we're going to be talking about. And, you know, the passage starts out in the most wonderful of ways for me, the guy who's going to be teaching it, saying, Not many of you should become teachers, for we know that those who teach will be judged by greater strictness.
[2:31] So, you know, it's a nice, comforting thought to me as I get up here to teach on this passage that everything I say is going to be judged by a harsher standard. But if you don't know me, my name is Eric.

I'm the youth guy here at Watermark. And I'm very excited to be able to share with you guys today. The emphasis of our talk today will not be on that first verse, but on the power of our words in general.
And to start our discussion on words, I want to start not in James chapter 3, but in Genesis chapter 1. Because if you look at the Bible, it starts the first three chapters with an incredible, incredible commentary on the overwhelming power of words.
At the start of the Bible, God speaks. He says, Let there be life. And God's words create. God's words bring life into existence.
God's words bring order out of chaos. God's words bless.
[3:55] God's words bring names to the animals. And then, after naming all the animals, the man realizes that there's no match for him. All the other animals have matches for each other, and he has no match.

And so God gives him a match for himself, the woman. And when the man sees this woman, the man uses his words to worship God. So we have an incredible commentary on the positive power of words.
That words can create. That words can give life. That words can bless. That words can obey. That words can worship. And yet, words also have incredible destructive power. In Genesis chapter 3,

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the serpent enters into the story.
The serpent uses words to question the goodness of God. To create doubt in the mind of the man and woman as to whether God was really good in the things that he had said to them.
The serpent uses words to tempt Adam and Eve to sin. And after Adam and Eve listened to the serpent, they used their words to shift the blame and hide from the responsibility for what they've done.
[5:01] And yet, God, being the awesome God that he is, uses his words again to seek out those who are lost. After finding them, he uses his words to curse them and the world that he has created for their sin.

But he doesn't leave the story bleak and hopeless. He uses his words to give them hope and promise a salvation that will come one day. In these first three chapters of the Bible, words literally initiate the course of history, launch the greatest rebellion in all of history of creation against our creator, and alter the course of history.
Words are powerful. And that's something that James wants us to see in this chapter. The first thing that he wants us to see, like I said, is words are powerful.
He starts out by making this blanket statement of the power of words with no judgment whatsoever about the badness that we can use them for, or the goodness that we can use them for. He just says they're powerful.
And he gives us one statement and two illustrations to show us that words are powerful. First off, in verse two, he says, if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.
[6:21] Now, we just had Charles read us this passage so we can look ahead and see, oh, look, no one can control his tongue perfectly. No one can control his entire body perfectly.

But James isn't saying that at this point. All he's saying right now is the tongue is powerful enough and big enough that if you can control it, you can control your whole body. He's saying it has a power that is disproportionate to its size.
It is harder to control than you would expect it to be for its size. It's a powerful tool. And he gives us a couple other illustrations to show how powerful the tongue is.
He talks about bits that we can put into a horse's mouth. A small little piece of metal. But when you stick it in the right place in the horse's mouth, a small child can control this great beast.
And again, he doesn't make any judgment on the morality of controlling a horse with a bit in the mouth. They can be used for good.
[7:20] They can be used for farming. They can be used for transportation. They can be used, if your city is under attack, to defend your city. And they can be used for evil. They can be used to trample on other people or trample on their property.

They can be used to attack others unjustly. They can be used for good. They can be used for bad. He's not making a commentary on the morality of this use. He's just saying the bit has a power that is disproportionate to its size.
And in the same way, the tongue has a power that is disproportionate to its size. He gives us another illustration and talks about a rudder on a ship.
A huge ship can be controlled by a small rudder. It takes huge amounts of wind. Back in those days, now we have big engines that can power the ships. But it takes huge amounts of power to make this ship go.
But once it's going, it just takes a little rudder to guide the direction that it goes in. And again, no comment on the morality of steering a ship with a rudder. You can use ships for good purposes, to transport people and goods, to go fishing and collect goods.
[8:29] If your city is under attack, you can use your ships to defend yourself. And ships can be used for evil. Pirates use them to go rob people. People launch unjust naval attacks.

Ships can be used for good. Ships can be used for evil. He's not commenting on whether it's good or bad. He's just saying it has a power disproportionate to its size.
And in the same way, the tongue has a power disproportionate to its size. So his introduction to the tongue is not some big, strong condemnation of the tongue's power, but simply a statement that the tongue has an incredible power that is disproportionate to its small size.
But as he moves further into his discussion, he doesn't remain neutral in his discussion of the tongue. He says how great a forest is set as blaze by a small fire.

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Now again, fire can be good. It can be bad. Back in those days, fire was essential for life. They needed it to stay warm in the winter. They needed it to cook their food. But the threat of fire getting out of control was a constant danger.
[9:39] And when fire got out of control, there was no way that they could get it back under control effectively. And so it could destroy villages. It could destroy forests.

And James, in his discussion of the fire, doesn't remain neutral, but he talks about how great a forest is set on fire. He's talking about a forest fire, something big, something out of control, something that destroys and kills and leaves a path of wreckage behind it.
He's not talking about a small little cooking fire, but a huge fire. And therefore, the fire, the small fire or the spark that starts that big fire is not something that is neutral.
It's something that's bad because it has started such a destructive, powerful force behind it. And he's saying that our tongues have this power in them. That our tongues have the destructive power of a forest fire.
Something so small starts something so big, so destructive. And he goes on as if there was any question left about what he's saying. In verse 6, he says, The tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness.
[10:53] The tongue in itself is a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is a fire. We are like dragons. We open our mouths and fire comes out.

I don't know how many of you have read The Hobbit or seen the movie The Hobbit. But in The Hobbit, there is a dragon named Smaug. And he comes in and he wants to take over this town because they have a huge pile of gold that they control.
And in order to take over this town, all he has to do is fly in there and open his mouth. And fire comes out and kills everyone in his path. So he just goes down to this town, opens his mouth and destroys, wipes out the town, takes over this mountain of gold and lives there.
And James is saying, we are like that dragon. All we have to do is open our mouths, fire pours out and it can consume everyone in our paths. There is an incredible, powerful, destructive force behind our tongues.
And notice that I'm saying we. Like this isn't something that I'm saying, oh, everyone else struggles with this and I've got it down. No, this is something that we all struggle with.
[12:09] James talks about that in verse 2. He says, we all stumble in many ways. He's including himself in this discussion. I struggle with this. I mean, I was reminded constantly this week, I'd be studying and researching on the tongue and the power of it and how we need to use it for good.

And then, like, just a couple hours later, I'd be talking to someone and I'd catch myself trying to destroy them with my words. And I thought, how messed up am I? I'm getting ready to teach on how destructive our words can be and realizing how destructive they can be and then going out and using my words for destructive purposes.
It's something that all of us struggle with, something that all of us need to work on. And something that ultimately, in this lifetime, we're never going to get it perfect. But we can make progress, I think.
But I want to look at why our negative speech is such a big deal. I have two big reasons that I see in this passage. First off, because we deceive ourselves.
And although we're using our speech destructively, we think that we're using it for positive means. He says in verse 9, With it, with the tongue, we bless our Lord and Father, and with it, we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.
[13:32] Now, with James' audience, whenever they heard the name of God spoken, culturally, what they would do is they would actually verbally say a blessing. So if you're reading the Bible and it gets to the name of God, everyone in the congregation says out, His name be blessed.

Every single time the word of God is mentioned. These people would never, ever, ever, ever have dreamed of saying something bad directly against the name of God. They went out of their way to bless his name when they heard it spoken.
And they probably would have pointed to this and said, Look, we're using our tongues for good. We're blessing God. But he says, You're cursing people who are made in God's image.
If you were truly blessing God, if you truly believed all this wonderful stuff that you say you do about who God is, then you wouldn't be cursing man who is made in his image.
Because the way that we speak to and about people who are made in God's image reflects what we truly believe about God. Think of it this way.

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[14:39] You're on a vacation to Thailand. You fly in. You go to the airport. You convert some money. You go. You get settled at your hotel. Somehow, during the course of this trip, you've got it set up so that you get to meet the king of Thailand.

Really big deal, right? And you are getting prepared for this. You search online and figure out what are the right clothes that I need to wear. You sit down and you write out a script of everything that you're going to say when you're with the king so that you do not mess up.
And then you go online and you do more research and realize maybe you should leave out that part about loving the king and I when you're talking to the king of Thailand. Because that's generally frowned upon. You do your research.
You get everything prepared. You go. You meet with the king and you nail it. You know when to bow at the right time. You know when to sit down, when to stand up, what to say, how to say it, what clothes to wear.
Everything goes perfectly. You leave the meeting with the king. You're going back to your hotel. You stop by a street market. You're trying to buy something from a vendor.
[15:40] You get in an argument with this vendor over the price of something. And you get really upset. You pull out a piece of that Thai money that you got at the airport. And to show how upset you are with this vendor, you rip it apart.

You throw it on the ground. You stomp on it. Now what's going to happen right there is the Thai police are going to come and arrest you. Why is that?
Because the Thai money has the king of Thailand's face on it. It bears his image. And in Thailand, they believe that what you do to money bearing the king's image, you do to the king.
And so as the police are dragging you off to prison, you can scream all you want. I just met with the king. He loved me. It went perfectly. And they can say, you don't respect our king. You don't care about our king because you just destroyed and stomped on his image.
And they will lock you away. In the same way, we can say everything good that we want to and about God.
[16:39] But if we do not back that up by saying the same things about people who are created in his image, we show that we do not truly value God like we say we do. And so we trick ourselves into thinking that we're using our words for good by blessing God when in reality, we're using our words for destruction by cursing people around us who are made in God's image.

And the second reason that our negative speech is so important is because the words that come out of our mouths are just a reflection of what is in our hearts. Jesus himself says this in Matthew 12, 34.
Kind of cool. One, two, three, four. He says, out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. The things that come out right here have their origin right here.
The words that we say are not spoken in a vacuum, but they're a reflection of what is already inside us. You know, one of the things that Tobin loves to fill his life with is Diet Coke.
Diet Coke. I'm sure if you've been here before to hear him preach, you've heard him mention that. And let me tell you, if you've only heard him talk about that from the stage, you have no idea. He loves Diet Coke. He has this cup in the office that he fills with Diet Coke.
[17:52] And he carries it around with him. And I want you to imagine, Tuesday morning, we're getting ready for staff meeting, and Tobin's walking from his office to the table where we have staff meeting, bringing his cup because he loves his Diet Coke.

And as I am sitting at my desk, which he has to walk by to get to staff meeting, I slide back my chair and go to stand up because I want to go to staff meeting too. But at times, perfectly, so that as I go to stand up, my head bumps his cup.
Now, here's what's not going to come out of that cup. Water, apple juice, Sprite, anything else not Diet Coke. Because what has gone into that cup is Diet Coke.
So when we bump that cup, what is going to come out of that cup is Diet Coke. And in the same way, when we get bothered, when we get irritated, when we have life happen to us, what comes out of our hearts is going to be what has come into our hearts.
What comes out of our hearts is going to come out of our mouths. If we are filling ourselves with hateful, angry thoughts, then what's going to come out is hateful, angry words.
[19:08] Destructive words come from destructive hearts. And that's what James wants us to see here, that our words are powerful because they show what is truly inside us.

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And we can let words out and say, I didn't mean to say that, but in reality, the words only came from what was already inside our hearts.
And James, in his discussion of the tongue right here, basically leaves us on a really negative note. It's a real downer. He talks about our hypocrisy and how, you know, a saltwater spring and a freshwater spring can't be combined.
It's one or the other. Yet we try and produce both from our mouths. We're hypocrites. And then he changes topics and talks about wisdom. Sort of depressing if you just look at it like that.
But the thing that we have to remember is that although the tongue has great power for destruction, when redeemed, the tongue has great power for good.
[20:11] James, in verse 8, he says, no human being can tame the tongue. We can spend our entire lives trying, and we will fail again and again and again.

It looks hopeless for us. There's no way that it can be fixed. But the thing we need to remember is that although no human being can tame the tongue, God can.
See, God is the one who made the tongue. In that great creation narrative, he spoke everything into being. He made the world and everything in it. He made man with a tongue.
And he called it good. He didn't just make man and leave him there and say like, oh, this tongue, you know, it's such a bad thing, but he kind of needs it to be able to communicate with other people, so we'll leave it there.
No, he made it, he called it good. Actually, he made one tongue, and he said it's not quite good, so he made a second tongue. Then he said it's very good. You can read into that what you want about God liking things that require two tongues.
[21:18] But anyways, the tongue was created good by God. But the tongue, just like everything else, was subject to the fall.

When man disobeyed against God, every part of our being was affected by that, including the words that we speak.
And so the words that we speak now are a reflection of this fallen state of our hearts, the fact that we have rebelled against God, and we speak words that reflect that rebellion against him.
But that's not the end of the story. John chapter 1 talks about Jesus and calls him the word who became flesh.
Jesus came to die for our sins, including the ones that we speak. The word became flesh to die and pay the penalty for our unrighteous words.
[22:28] Jesus came. He died. He paid the price that we deserve. And he is now, the Bible says, making all things new.

All things includes our physical bodies, the physical world that we're a part of, our tongues. He's not concerned with just saving our souls, but with making all things new.
The Bible says that one day there will be a physical resurrection from the dead, that those of us who have believed in Jesus will physically live with him forever in new resurrection bodies, just like Jesus had.
And that body will have a tongue and that those tongues will be used to praise God. And we will not turn around and curse our neighbor after we have praised God, but that we will be new.
And it even says in Revelation 5.13 that we will bless God with these tongues. It says, I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea and all that is in them saying to him who sits on the throne and to the lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever.
[23:45] Every creature on heaven and earth, under the earth will bless God with our tongues. God will finish this work that he has started.

He will make all things new. He will take these tongues, this power that we have used for destruction and he will use it for good. And the even crazier thing about that is that this isn't just something we have to wait for till we're dead.
Something that starts now. Paul says in Romans 6.22, but now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification, to us becoming more like Jesus and to its end, eternal life.
He's saying this isn't just something that we have to wait for forever and ever. Something that starts now. This good news that Jesus came and died and rose again for us has power that transforms our lives right now today.

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There is a now power to the gospel so that even though we struggle, we fight, we still won't make it to having perfect tongues today. If we are Christians, God is working in our lives, transforming our hearts, which will in turn transform our tongues.
[24:57] The Bible says that he gives us fruit to show that he is at work in our lives. Things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

God's not just waiting till we're dead to make us new, but he started that process now. He is at work in our lives, transforming us today. And because it's God who's responsible for transforming our tongues, when we see our tongues being transformed, that shouldn't be a source for pride because of what we've done, but a source of worship for what God has done.
We talked a lot about the destructive power of a tongue, but when it's redeemed, when it's made new, the tongue doesn't lose its power, but instead the power is transformed.
Instead of tearing down and destroying and killing and bringing death, the tongue is now able to build up, to give life, to worship, to bless. It's a flip, a transformation.
And so as we close today, I want to leave us with some questions to think about on our words. First is, how do we use our words? Are we like dragons?
[26:17] People don't want to stand in front of us because they're afraid of the fire that's going to come out of our mouths when we open them? Or are our words a source of life to those around us?

And what is happening in our hearts that's causing us to talk this way? Are our words coming from hearts that are insecure and restless and fearful?
Or are they coming from hearts that are in love with Jesus, that are being constantly transformed by him? What would it look like if we were a church that was known for blessing people with our words?
Here at Watermark, we talk a lot about gospel, community, and mission. It's a process that we want people to go on spiritually. Gospel, understand who God is and what he has done for us and trust in him.
Community, once you have believed in God, enter into this body and live life as a part of this body. And then mission, go out and tell others about how great God is.
[27:36] And we've looked at how the gospel transforms our tongues, how the work of Christ is making our tongues new. But once we understand that, the way that we speak fundamentally transforms our community and our mission.

Because words are, at their heart, communal. They shape how we communicate and relate to other people. And so if we were a church known for blessing others with our words, how would that transform our community groups?
If we were a church known for blessing others with our words, how would that transform our interaction with the non-Christian world around us?
If we were a church known for blessing others with our words, how would that transform our families? I had someone tell me this week, today was a great day. For the first time in six years, my mom told me she loved me.
It was a great day. That day, that person's mom used her words to give life to her son. But I had to wonder, what had her words been doing for the previous six years?
[28:57] What have my words been doing for the previous six years? So as we finish today, I want to leave us with a challenge. And here's the challenge.

Try and find someone that you can bless with your words each day this week. And Tobin said we may even have someone come up and share about this experience next week, so be ready.
And this won't be easy. It's not something that's normal for us to do, right? We live in Hong Kong. We speak words to accomplish tasks. At work, we tell people what to do so that they can get the job done. We go to a restaurant, we tell the waiter or waitress what to get us so that they can bring us our food and we can eat.
We get in the cab, we tell the guy where to go so we can get home. We get home, we tell our kids what to do so that they can get stuff done. Our words are all about efficiency. And when we speak words of blessing to people, they're not going to be about efficiency.
But they will give life. And so, my challenge is at least one person each day this week finds someone that you can bless with your words.
[30:11] And it may not get anything accomplished. And you know what? That's okay. Because loving our neighbors, loving those who God has created in His image, reflects what we truly think

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and believe about God.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for your love for us. We thank you for creating the world and for creating it good.
We thank you that although we have failed, that you came, that you are making all things new, including our tongues. and that you have given us this incredible power that we have the opportunity to use for your glory.
So we pray that as we go throughout this week, each of us would be shaped by your gospel. We'd be shaped by an understanding of your love for us and what you have done for us.
We pray that we would use our words as a means of blessing others and giving life and not as a means of destroying and tearing down other people who have been made in your image. God, we need grace for this, so please give it to us.
[31:27] In your name, amen. How are you guys doing? Thanks, Eric, for bringing us God's word and challenging us for this week as we go out to speak words of life and blessing to everybody that we run into.

Pray and ask, Lord, what that looks like for you and your family and in your workplace. We have a lot of neat things going on as we enter into the holiday, holidays. If you live in this area, you probably received something like this this weekend.
If not, you'll do it early next week. It's a flyer. Statistics say no matter what country you're in, that people are more likely to go and visit a church on the holidays of Christmas and Easter.
People, they're asking questions and so we sent 10,000 of these out to the households in this area but there are about 400 on the table out there. We want to ask you to take some with you and give them to your friends.
Not just throw it on the desk and walk away but invite them to come with you. The reason we started this church was not to gather people who were already of faith but was to reach out to people who aren't in the family yet.
[32:35] And so that is one of these things that drive us as a church as we think about planning other churches and moving out into areas where people don't know Christ yet. So this is a great, great opportunity for you to invite friends.

On Good Friday we're going to have a gathering at the community center. We've done it the last two years. It's a very special time. It's a come and go as you want time. There'll be a small program, some worship and fellowship and it'll end in doing communion as a family.
So your family will do the communion with the elders. It's a great opportunity. And then on Easter Sunday we're going to have the outreach service here at 1030 and then at 2 o'clock we have 1,000 Easter eggs and we hide them in the podium out there and we're going to do an outreach to the community.
And so we'd love for you to be a part of that. Community groups are getting involved and your community group knows what they'll be doing in that time. But again, we ask you to pray and pray that God would move in people's hearts and people would come to know Christ and they would fall in love with Him.
So there's a lot of really neat things and opportunities for you to invite and engage people in your world to invite them to come here about Christ in that part. Also, Tuesday night is the men's gathering at the community center so if you're a man, be there.
[33:46] We have had great fellowships. We've been doing it every other week and so it's this Tuesday at 730. Food is provided. It goes until about 9. It's a really good gathering. You know, when we started the church we don't ask for money in offering in front.

The fact that the offering baskets are off to the side and we ask for you to give as God impacts your heart because we feel like that's a great indicator for us as an understanding of the gospel.
One of the things we did as we started that is we talked about these things a lot but we also make known our needs. And so when we fitted out the community center if you've been there no money was raised for the community center.
One Sunday, the very first Sunday I came up and said hey, we need toilets with seats, we need chairs, we need these things and the next week people gave those things. I came back the next week and said okay, we need 100 chairs and we need some projectors, we need some air conditioners and the next week the church family gave those things.

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And so as we continue to pray and think about that there are a couple needs that we have we want you to pray about and one of them is just housing. We have interns coming in and we're looking for people who have extra flat that the church, we don't want it for free but we want to be able to rent it from you in this area so we can house the interns that are coming in because we have a lot of neat opportunities with people coming in to serve the church in the next couple months.
[35:04] So if you have extra space available, please contact me or in the office because that's just a need we have for that issue for serving the church. Also we're looking for people who have office space around this part of Hong Kong because as we're growing we're starting Bible studies and gatherings and community groups and so if you have extra office space that's available anytime during the week even if it's 8 o'clock at night just send us a short email here I have an office space that can fit 25 people 8 o'clock here and you can use it just let me know because we're thinking as we grow we're just looking for places to grow and we're just trusting the family of God to provide those places.

Okay? Is that good? So be praying about that and that is a huge thing as we continue this step of faith. Let me pray for us. Father we just we come before you and as the passage said as we heard the thing that we're called to do is impossible on our own and I think that for many many years for many of us we've been trying to do the impossible in so many ways and the passage says clearly that unless the perfect man your son comes in and makes all things new and changes all things that there's no hope it was that way from the garden and it's that way today.
So we come to you as your people and we worship that perfect person your son Jesus and as we sing Hosanna Lord please come we pray Lord that you would continue to show yourselves to us as a people and as a church Father we surrender our hearts to you we surrender our lives to you Lord we surrender our resources to you because they're already yours we surrender our tongue to you fill our heart with things that are worthy enough to speak help us to be a people and a church that are of your word and speak words of life and wisdom and grace to everyone around us Lord help us to realize no matter how much we try behavior modification that our problem is still there and the only solution to that problem is Jesus and so we come before you and desperately beg you to enter into our life and we repent of our selfishness
Father we pray for this part of Hong Kong in these next couple weeks with so many people even just right next door in Bel Air who don't know you who don't come to church we pray for the flyers that went out we pray for us as your church to go out and to walk with courage as we talked about last week with Rahab and Abraham and to trust you and to invite friends into this community so they might see your son and fall in love with him Father we pray for the money that we take up right now we pray that as it goes to a large port to outreach that you would bless it and multiply the tithe that we give back to you so that we would use it to honor you in all things and Father we just pray for that little grassy area over there from 2 to 4 next week but 2 weeks from now but so many other days that your spirit would be there and the people wandering through there would find something besides an Easter egg hunt they'd find people who love you they'd find your son Jesus so Lord we come before you this morning and we just thank you and we worship you and we need you desperately we pray these things in Jesus name
Amen God bless you we'll be back here again next Sunday right here grab some drinks on the way out and we'll see you have a great week

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