

## Introduction

Words are extremely powerful things. Have you ever taken some time to consider all that can be accomplished by words. This goes from small and seemingly insignificant things to extremely important and weighty things.

With words alone a couple goes from being unmarried to married. Before the minister pronounces the couple “man and wife” they aren’t married. But after those words are spoken, they are.

In a similar way, consider how powerful the following three words are, “I love you.” These words can make or break a relationship.

Words are so powerful that we have laws around issues of defamation and libel. This doesn’t come from just anywhere. Two of the Ten Commandments are directly associated with words; “Do not take the Lord’s name in vain.” and “Do not bear false witness.”

Words can affirm and built people up. Words can also break down and destroy people.

Everyone has heard the old rhyme, “sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.” But as you live long enough you know that isn’t true. Indeed, it is words that can do much more damage to you than sticks and stones ever could.

Scripture confirms all of this. God created the world *by his word*. The New Testament teaches that Jesus is the Word of God in the flesh. What’s more, the universe is continually upheld by the word of God’s power ([Col 1](#)).

Words can build and words can destroy. And it is this very reality that James teaches in this morning’s sermon text. In my sermon I will draw out three points from [James 3](#):

1. The Tongue Boasts of Great Things (vv. 1-5a)
2. The Tongue Can Cause Great Damage (vv. 5b-12)

### 3. The Wise Work in Meekness (vv. 13-18)

## The Tongue Boasts of Great Things (vv. 1-5a)

The first thing James does is issue a warning. “***Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.***” This is a sober warning to myself and anyone else who holds a position as a teacher in the church. Both James and the whole of Scripture teach that those who sit in positions of authority will be judged to a greater degree based on the position they held.

Jesus teaches his disciples the same principle in [Luke 12](#) when he told them, “Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.” ([Luke 12:48](#))

While this principle applies to leaders in the church, it also applies more broadly. Parents, employers, and older siblings should all listen closely to James’ warning. For everyone in a position of authority will have much required of them.

It is in verse 2 that James turns to the topic at hand, “***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.***”

In [James 2](#), James writes against those whose faith went no deeper than their lips. James told those people that if they don’t actually *live out their faith* then their faith is worthless.

Here, James looks at the other side of the coin by turning to the issue of the tongue.

James begins by confessing that “***we all stumble in many ways.***” Just as John says in [1 John 1:8](#), “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” so too James teaches that we all stumble.

But James wants to hone in on a particular area where all are prone to stumble. This is in the words that we speak. James says that the man who can bridle his tongue is a “***perfect man***”. Remember, in James, the word for perfect is closely

related to our concept of *maturity*. James wants his audience to grow in Christian maturity and here he is showing them the way forward. They must learn to **bridle their tongues**.

James goes on to give two illustrations for the way our tongues relate to the rest of our bodies. If you bridle a horse you can **guide their whole bodies as well**. Also, even though ships are driven by strong winds, **they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs**.

Even though your tongue is small, it boasts of great things.

The principle here is one that is taught by Jesus. [Matthew 12:34](#) “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.”

The practices of your speech serve as a mirror to your heart. And as I hope to show, this is *primarily* about the issues of gossip and slander within the community of the church.

## The Tongue Can Cause Great Damage (vv. 5b-12)

James lays it out bluntly in the second half of verse 5 and verse 6, “**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 addresses the corporate and individual levels in this section. Corporately, the leaders in the church serve as the church’s mouthpiece. This is why he says not many should become teachers. The spoken leadership of the pastor guides the church. This is a great responsibility for any church leader. Like a bridle in a horse’s mouth or a rudder on a ship, the words of a pastor will steer the whole body. This is why those who are given to anger or rashness should not be given access to the pulpit or to teaching in the church. They will set the church ablaze.

But James is also speaking of the level of the individuals in the church. The tongue of each member of the church has the ability to set the forest ablaze. The speech you choose to use can set the whole church ablaze. Your words have the ability to stain the whole body.

Here, James is speaking about the way that gossip and slander can set a community on fire. This is all the more true the closer the community is to one another. The closer the houses are to one another the more likely they are all to catch on fire if a spark is ignited.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we must be so careful with the way we speak with one another. Especially regarding the way we talk about one another. The reason why so much caution is necessary is because sins like gossip are sins that deceive everyone involved.

What do I mean by this? Gossip is so deceptive because those participating might not think they are doing it. Rarely is gossip obvious. More times than not, the way the sins of gossip and slander occur are sneaky and deceptive. Instead of saying, “did you hear what John said?!?” or “did you hear what Jane did?!?” gossip begins, “I have a concern that some in our church might do or say\_\_\_\_\_.” It is couched in piety and concern. But ultimately gossip seeks to destroy the church. And it doesn’t really care if the person is every aware they are doing it.

As Christians, we are called to honor one another. To consider one another more worthy of honor than ourselves. And this responsibility doesn’t go away just because someone isn’t present.

James is calling his hearers and I am calling you to take seriously the need to do the godly work of seeking to tame your tongue. But this is no small task! Beasts can be tamed **but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless, evil, full of deadly poison.**

Without Christ you and I are hopeless in our efforts to tame our tongues. We will be just like what James describes in verses 9-12. One moment blessing **our Lord and father** and the next cursing **people who are made in the likeness of God**. We must all hear James’ questions, “**Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree bear olives or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.**”

The call, just like in [James 1:8](#) is to be singleminded. Not like the double-minded and unstable man.

But we have hope because of Christ. Jesus is the perfect man who tamed his tongue. As the prophet Isaiah wrote, “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth.”

Place your thoughts and your focus solely of Christ Jesus your Lord! Turn from the sins of the tongue asking God for forgiveness and for help from the Holy Spirit.

## The Wise Work in Meekness(vv. 13-19)

James has shown the power of the tongue. And what James shows is that the tongue is a particularly good barometer of one's spiritual condition. Your praise God with your tongue. Are you cursing those made in his image?

But in conclusion to our text, James changes directions. James rounds out what he began back in chapter 2. James admonished those who claim to have faith but not works and here he admonishes those who use their tongues to set the church community ablaze.

James concludes this section by offering a positive vision. ***“Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.”***

James' goal is for his hearers to grow into a wise and mature faith. The way to grow wise and mature in your faith is by living out your faith in meekness.

James contrasts this with what characterizes many in his audience. Those who ***“have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in their hearts.”*** These things are ***earthly, unspiritual, and demonic.*** They breed ***disorder and every evil practice.***

***But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.***

There were leaders in the churches James wrote to who were characterized by their jealousy and selfish ambition. These things would lead only to disorder in the church. Likewise, when these things are present in the body, they set the church ablaze, specifically through the tongue.

But when God's people turn away from these things and seek to show their works in the meekness of wisdom, they will gain ***a harvest of righteousness.***

James solution is for his audience to learn meekness. Meekness is a word that is easy to misunderstand. If you ask many Christians to define meekness you will probably get an answer that is something like “weakness” or passivity. But this is

not what meekness is. Meekness is entrusting your self to God and living a life of obedience to his word.

Meekness is not rolling over, but it refuses to turn to underhanded practices in order to try and accomplish its ends. Meekness refuses to put its trust in men. Meekness is a form of trust in God.

Let us trust in God in meekness so that we might gain a harvest of righteousness. Or as Jesus stated, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN!