

Bible Fellowship Teaching Plan for James 3:1-12 (October 18, 2026)  
The Power of the Tongue

Central Truth: Genuine faith is demonstrated by speech that honors God, edifies others, and reflects a heart being transformed by the Holy Spirit. Although the tongue is small, it can have an enormous influence for good or evil. We cannot fully control our speech through human effort alone; we need Christ's forgiveness and the Spirit's transforming work in our hearts.

Key Passage (10): "From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so."

Opening Questions: Can you remember a time in your life when a single word or sentence--either spoken to you or spoken by you--had a lasting effect on a relationship? Why do words sometimes leave a deeper mark than the person who spoke them intended?

Background: James returns to a theme he introduced in chapter 1: the relationship between genuine faith and the way we speak. In verse 19, he urged believers to be "quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger," and, in verse 26, he warned us that the religion of a person who claims to be religious but does not bridle the tongue is worthless.

In chapter 3, James focuses first on the responsibility of teachers who will be judged more strictly because of their influence over others. He then describes the tongue through vivid illustrations: a horse's bridle, a ship's rudder, a destructive fire, a restless evil, and deadly poison. Finally, he exposes the contradiction of blessing God while cursing people made in God's image.

Lesson Objectives:

- 1) Explain why James warns us against casually assuming the responsibility of teaching others.

- 2) Describe how the tongue can influence the direction and character of a person's life.
- 3) Identify ways destructive speech can harm individuals, families, relationships, and churches.
- 4) Explain why no person can fully tame the tongue through human effort alone.
- 5) Recognize the contradiction of praising God while demeaning people made in His image.
- 6) Understand that sinful speech reveals a heart problem, not merely a problem with the things we say.
- 7) Identify practical ways to speak truthfully, graciously, thoughtfully, and lovingly.
- 8) how Christ's forgiveness and the Holy Spirit's transforming work provide hope for change.
- 9) Personally apply James's teaching as each student identifies those who have been hurt by his or her words and how the offender needs to seek forgiveness.

I. Those Who Serve in a Teaching Roll Have a Greater Responsibility for Their Words (1-2)

A. James begins with a serious warning: "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness."

1. Teaching God's Word is a privilege, but it also carries significant responsibility.
2. Teachers help shape what others believe and how they live. Their words must be faithful to Scripture, and their lives should reflect the truths they teach.

B. James includes himself in this warning: "we all stumble in many ways."

1. James is not saying that only teachers are accountable for their speech; everyone influences others, whether a child, friend, neighbor, coworker, or fellow believer.
2. The word “perfect” in verse 2 refers to spiritual maturity and completeness, not sinless perfection. Learning to control our speech is an important mark of growing maturity.

### Discussion Questions

- 1) Why does James warn that teachers will be judged more strictly?
- 2) What problems arise when someone takes a teaching or leadership role for recognition, influence, or a desire to criticize or manipulate others?
- 3) Why is it essential for teachers to practice what they preach?
- 4) How can our words influence people who are watching us, even if we are not formal teachers?
- 5) What does spiritual maturity have to do with controlling our speech?

### Questions for Personal Reflection

- 1) Do I recognize the influence my words have on others?
- 2) Am I careful to practice what I tell others about what the Bible teaches?
- 3) Do I speak with humility, remembering that I, too, stumble in many ways?
- 4) Who might be watching my life and learning from the way I speak?

## II. The Tongue Has Tremendous Power (3-6)

A. James uses three vivid pictures to illustrate the influence of our words.

1. A horse's bridle: A small device can direct a powerful animal.
2. A ship's rudder: A relatively small control that can turn a large ship, even in strong winds.
3. Fire: A small spark can cause enormous destruction.

B. The tongue is a world of evil all to itself--“a world of unrighteousness.”

1. It stains the whole body--no part of us is unaffected by unrestrained, ungodly speech.
  2. It sets on fire the entire course of life--it spreads through everything we are and everything we do.
  3. It is “set on fire by hell.” Satan controls the speech of those who refuse to allow the Holy Spirit to transform their lives.
- C. The tongue is a powerful instrument. When it’s governed by godly wisdom, it can build up; when it’s ruled by sinful desires, it can easily destroy marriages, families, friendships, churches, communities--even nations.

#### Discussion Questions:

- 1) Why does James compare the tongue to a bridle and a rudder?
- 2) What do these illustrations teach us about the relationship between small actions and large consequences?
- 3) Is the image of a fire particularly appropriate for destructive speech?
- 4) What kinds of words can cause lasting damage even when the speaker considers them insignificant?
- 5) How can carefully chosen words help prevent conflict or heal a damaged relationship?
- 6) What practical things can we do to help us think before we speak in anger?

#### Questions for Personal Reflection:

- 1) Have my words ever caused damage that I did not anticipate?
- 2) Am I more likely to speak impulsively when I am angry, frustrated, tired, or embarrassed?
- 3) In general, do I use my words to calm conflicts or to make things worse?
- 4) What relationship in my life could benefit from more thoughtful and gracious speech?

### III. The Tongue Cannot Be Tamed by Human Effort Alone (7-8)

- A. James says that people have been able to tame many kinds of animals, but not the tongue.
- B. He calls the tongue “a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”
- C. No human being can tame the tongue through personal strength alone. Only by God's grace and the transforming work of the Holy Spirit can our speech honor God and edify others.
  - 1. Augustine: “He does not say: None can tame the tongue; but *No man*; in order that, when it is tamed, we may acknowledge it to be effected by the mercy of God, the help of God, the grace of God.”
  - 2. Alexander MacLaren: “Man’s impossibilities are Christ’s actualities. So we have here to fall back on James’s earlier word, ‘If any of you lack, ... let him ask of God, ... and it shall be given him.’”
  - 3. The Christian response to sinful speech is not merely to memorize rules or try to develop better manners. We must bring our hearts before the Lord, confess our failures, seek His forgiveness, and depend on Him to change our hearts--the source of our words.

#### Discussion Questions:

- 1) What does James mean when he says that no human being can tame the tongue?
- 2) What’s the difference between trying to stop saying hurtful words on our own and seeking the Holy Spirit’s help to transform our hearts?
- 3) How can prayer help us respond differently when we are tempted to speak in anger?
- 4) What role do repentance, accountability, and the Holy Spirit play in changing our speech?
- 5) How does recognizing our weakness help us depend more fully on Christ?

#### Questions for Personal Reflection:

- 1) Do I rely primarily on my own willpower, or do I ask God to transform my heart?
- 2) What part of the words I say or the people I speak disrespectfully to do I need to confess to the Lord and repent of?
- 3) When I fail with my words, do I make excuses, or do I repent and seek forgiveness?
- 4) What specific prayer could I begin praying before I speak improperly?

#### IV. Blessing God While Cursing People Is a Contradiction (9-12)

A. James exposes a troubling inconsistency: “With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.

1. The same mouth that sings praises to God is all too often be used to belittle, insult, humiliate, or slander another person.
2. This should not be so.

B. His three illustrations make the point unmistakable.

1. A spring doesn’t produce both fresh and salt water from the same opening.
2. A fig tree doesn’t produce olives.
3. A grapevine doesn’t produce figs.

C. The natural source determines the kind of fruit produced. In the same way, the speech of a genuine follower of Christ should mirror what Jesus would say. The problem can’t be solved just by changing the kind of words we use while leaving the heart untouched.

D. Cursing others involves more than profanity. It includes gossip, cruel sarcasm, degrading names, racial or ethnic slurs, public humiliation, verbal abuse, dishonest exaggeration, and words that destroy hope instead of offering encouragement. Such speech disregards the dignity of people made in God's image.

E. “My brothers, these things ought not to be so!!”

### Discussion Questions:

- 1) Why is it contradictory to praise God while demeaning people made in His image?
- 2) What do the illustrations of the spring, fig tree, and grapevine teach us about the relationship between the heart and our words?
- 3) Why is hurtful speech not limited to profanity or obvious insults?
- 4) How can humor, sarcasm, or gossip become a means of humiliating another person?
- 5) Why should a person's dignity matter even when we disagree with that person or disapprove of his or her behavior?
- 6) What does it mean to speak words that honor God and edify others?
- 7) What guide do we use to measure whether our words truly edify others?

### Questions for Personal Reflection

- 1) Do I ever praise God in worship but speak unkindly about people afterward?
- 2) Am I tempted to disguise criticism as humor or gossip as a prayer request?
- 3) Do I speak differently about people when they are absent than when they are present?
- 4) Have I wounded someone with words and then dismissed the harm because I didn't intend for it to hurt?
- 5) From whom do I need to ask forgiveness for something I shouldn't have said?
- 6) How can I seek the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in my life so that I can truly honor God and edify others with the words I use?

### V. Summary and Application: Christ Forgives Our Words and Transforms Our Hearts

- A. James's teaching is serious, but it's not intended to leave us without hope. He reminds us that we all stumble in many ways, including through our

speech. Our hope is not in our ability to speak perfectly, but our hope is in Jesus Christ, who alone spoke with perfect righteousness.

- B. At the cross, Jesus took upon Himself the guilt of our sins, including our angry, careless, dishonest, and destructive words. Because of His finished work on the cross, we can confess our failures, receive His forgiveness, and seek reconciliation with those we have harmed.
- C. But forgiveness is not the end of His work. The Holy Spirit continues transforming our hearts, and, as our hearts become more like His, our words will begin to change as well.
- D. We need more than better vocabulary; we need hearts transformed by Christ. Colossians 4:6: “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.”
- E. Here’s a very practical test we should apply before we speak. Ask yourself these questions:
  1. First, “Is it true? Am I speaking honestly and accurately?”
  2. Second, “Is it kind? Am I treating the other person with dignity?”
  3. Third, “Is it necessary? Does this need to be said?”
  4. Fourth, “Is it constructive? Will it help, encourage, correct, or edify?”
  5. Fifth and most important: “Is it Christ-honoring? Does it reflect the character of Jesus?”

### Discussion Questions

- 1) Why is it important to remember the gospel when trying to fix our failures in the words we use?
- 2) How does Christ's forgiveness enable us to admit our wrongs without hiding or making excuses?
- 3) Why should we seek forgiveness from people we have hurt, rather than being satisfied with just confessing our sins to God alone?
- 4) How does the Holy Spirit change the source from which our words flow?
- 5) How can Paul’s words in Colossians 3:8-10 help us put away hurtful speech and live according to our new life in Christ?

### Questions for Personal Reflection

- 1) When I recognize that I have spoken wrongly, do I promptly confess it to God and seek forgiveness?
- 2) Do I make excuses for my words, or am I willing to acknowledge their impact?
- 3) Is there someone I need to apologize to or ask to forgive me?
- 4) Am I asking the Lord to change not only what I say but also my heart and the attitudes and desires that guide what I say?
- 5) What would it look like for my speech to become more gracious, truthful, and Christlike this week?

### Summary

1. Our words matter because they reveal our hearts and influence the lives of others.
2. Everything we say carries responsibility. Teachers face greater accountability, and everyone influences others through his or her words.
3. The tongue has great power. Like a rudder or a spark, something small can direct or destroy something much larger.
4. Human effort alone cannot tame the tongue. We need God's grace and the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.
5. Our speech should be consistent with our worship. We cannot honor God sincerely while treating people made in His image in a way other than how Jesus showed us how to treat them.
6. Christ offers forgiveness and transformation. He forgives our sinful words and changes the hearts from which our words come.
7. James is not simply asking us to become more careful speakers. He is calling us to become more mature followers of the Lord Jesus whose words reflect His character.

### Closing Challenges:

- 1) During the coming week, before you speak to others, ask yourself, “Is what I’m about to say true? Is it kind? Is it necessary? Is it constructive? Is it Christ-honoring?”
- 2) When you fail: Confess your sin, receive Christ's forgiveness, and seek forgiveness from anyone you’ve hurt.
- 3) Ask the Holy Spirit to transform your heart so that your words will reflect the character of Jesus more each day.

Sunday School Lesson for October 18, 2026  
James 3:1-12

Welcome to Sunday School on the go from the First Baptist Church in Tallassee. I'm Jim Glass, one of the teachers in the Pairs and Spares Class, and, on this third Sunday in October, we're well into a study of the challenging letter of James. Throughout our study of the gospel of John, we heard the Lord Jesus call His disciples to follow Him. In this brief letter, James shows us just how we truly follow Jesus.

In our study of the letter of James, you may have been confronted with something that's challenged the way you see your life as the mirror of God's Word has shown you where you're not living up to the standard of righteousness that should characterize the lives of those who truly follow Him. As I've said before, I hope this hasn't discouraged you, because James doesn't expose sin in our lives so that we would turn away from the Lord either in our defense or in defiance, but that we would recognize that He is diligently at work in us, transforming us, so that that we would be "perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."

In our study last week, James challenged us to take the pulse of our faith, reminding us that a faith devoid of acts and attitudes that show we're truly following Jesus is useless, worthless, dead, and wholly unable to save. As he presses home this important truth, he'll apply that to our speech, challenging us to answer the question, "Do the words of my mouth edify those who are made in the image and likeness of Christ and are my words honoring and pleasing to the Lord?"

James has warned us in the second half of chapter two that someone who claims to have faith but doesn't show any signs of the transformative power of that faith is foolish because such a faith is dead. After asking the question, "Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is

useless?” he proceeds to show from the actions and attitudes of Abraham and Rahab that--verse 24--: “a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.”

In chapter three, James transitions back to a theme he touched on in the first chapter, warning his readers against sins of the tongue. In verse nineteen, he told us, “let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.” Then, in verse 26, he wrote, “If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.”

James begins this part of his message with a warning that those who teach will be judged more strongly than others. In verse three and four, he tells us about the power of the tongue; in verses five and six, it's the depravity of the tongue; verses seven and eight, the inability of the tongue to be tamed; the duplicity of the tongue in verses nine through twelve; closing the chapter with a contrast between false and true wisdom in speech in verses thirteen through eighteen.

To begin, James speaks to those who have taken the role of a teacher within the congregation. In the first two verses, he writes, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 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.” Since no one is perfect, and, since the tongue is such an important tool in teaching, teachers must master the use of the tongue to avoid falling into a stricter judgment.

In Jewish synagogues of that day, anyone who had an inclination to do so could come forward to teach the congregation, and we see that in the life of our Lord as He entered synagogues on several occasions and taught the people. It seems that the same practice carried over into Christian congregations as well. Paul addressed this concern in the church in Corinth as he writes in First Corinthians, chapter fourteen, verse 26: “When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an

interpretation.” The freedom each person had to offer his own word of inspiration, encouragement, or proclamation led to some rather disorderly worship services that he felt the need to address. In verse 31, Paul offers his solution to the confusion that was being created: “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged, and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.”

The unbelieving Jews of the dispersion to whom James is writing were much like those in Rome whom Paul addressed in the second chapter of his letter to them beginning in verse seventeen, when he wrote, “But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth--you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. For, as it is written, ‘The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.’”

In teaching others, they had failed to practice what they preached. They failed to see that to preach the Law without being a doer of the Law was to cause God’s name to be blasphemed among the Gentiles, and that to claim to have faith and do nothing but talk about it was but to increase their own condemnation; for, in so doing, they placed themselves among those Pharisees whom the Lord condemned in Matthew, chapter 23, verse one, when He told the people: “So do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice.”

And notice that James takes his own advice to heart: “you know that **we** who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” James recognizes that he bears the same accountability as those to whom he’s writing. He even carries this idea over into the second verse: “we all stumble in many ways”--“every one of us stumbles in some way, even I’m not immune to making mistakes.” I don’t know about you, but this gives me a great sense of relief knowing that an author of scripture admits to making mistakes, so I know I’m in good company.

James’ warning is quite clear: “Every one of us sins, and we would face judgment for our sins were it not for the forgiveness made possible by the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Those of us who are teachers are liable to a greater scrutiny and consequence for our failures than those who are not teachers, because our obligation to live up to the law of liberty found through the gospel and the royal law that James has told us about in the first two chapters are far greater.

Most serious of all will be the judgment upon those who were not called or qualified to be teachers--whether through some form of fanaticism, a desire for fame or notoriety, a craze for controversy, or a love of fault-finding--who finagle themselves into positions of leadership where they presume to instruct and manipulate others. “They are among the fools,” one commentator writes, “who ‘rush in where angels fear to tread’ and thereby incur responsibilities which they need not, and ought not, to have incurred, because they do not possess the qualifications for meeting them and discharging them. The argument,” he says, “is simple and plain: ‘Some of us must teach. All of us frequently fall. Teachers who fall are more severely judged than others. Therefore do not many of you become teachers.’”

In what area of our lives do we most frequently fail? For James, it’s that area in which the activity of teachers specially lies: in speech. So the goal--the standard--he sets before his readers is this: “if anyone does not stumble in what

he says, he is a perfect man.” James is not thinking about the teacher who never makes a mistake, but of the person who never sins with his tongue.

Although James is obviously speaking to teachers in a formal sense, each and every one of us is being watched by someone else: a child, a peer, an unbeliever, someone who’s struggling with his or her faith. Whatever our place, position, or role is in life, someone is watching to see if we will live up to the high calling of God in Jesus Christ, and what they see in us could make an eternal difference in their lives, either for good or evil. Words matter because truth matters. Our words are never insignificant or unimportant. Whether we see it or not, what we say and how we say impacts those around us and bears tremendous responsibility.

At the end of the second verse, James says, “If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man,

able also to bridle his whole body.” By “perfect,” James doesn’t mean “sinless,” but someone who has reached a place of full spiritual and moral development--the goal he’s set forth for each of his readers as he wrote in verse four of the first chapter of this letter: that every believer would be “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” Such a person is no longer a spiritual baby, but a full-grown adult--mature and complete, with a firm command of soul and body. As we’ll see shortly, the person who can rein in the most rebellious part of his nature--the tongue--and keep it in total control, can certainly bridle also the rest: the hands the feet, heart, and the mind--the whole body. In fact, the skillfulness of controlling our speech so that it edifies those who are made in the image and likeness of Christ and honors the Lord is proof of the very perfection that James is talking about.

Like many of the Old Testament prophets, James doesn’t give a list of do’s and don’t’s as much as he draws word pictures in order to get his point across. His first images are that of a horse’s bridle and a ship’s rudder--verse three: “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.” The bit of the bridle is put into the horse’s mouth, and, with that bit in place, the rider can control the horse’s whole body and particularly where the horse goes. The rudder is a small piece of wood, but its motion can turn a huge ship, even if it’s being driven by strong winds.

Like a horse’s bit or a ship’s rudder, when the tongue is mastered, the rest of the body follows; but, when it’s not mastered, it’s like a fire--verse five: “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.”

We all know what damage a small fire can do, from Mrs. O’Leary’s cow that supposedly kicked over a lantern and started the great Chicago fire of 1871 to the more recent and largest fire in California’s history in 2019 that destroyed more than 410,000 acres caused by a single spark from a hammer driving a metal stake into the ground--an area almost equivalent to all of Elmore County (<https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/07/us/ranch-fire-caused-by-spark>).

“Fire,” it is sometimes said, “is a good servant, but a bad master,” and the very same thing may be said of the tongue. Like the lantern and that little spark from a metal stake that each caused such horrific destruction, so also is the tongue, James says. The tongue, although such a relatively small part of the body, can boast of great things, for when it frees itself from the restraint of a godly heart, it can release all kinds of destruction and cause an incredibly tremendous amount of damage--to an individual, to a marriage, to a relationship, to a church, to a business, or to a nation, and we could offer numerous examples for each of these. The potential for disaster is immeasurable, and all from that little muscle called the tongue.

James tells us that the tongue is “a fire--a world of unrighteousness.” It’s a world of evil all to itself. One commentator writes, “all kinds of evil that are in the world are exhibited there in miniature; it seems to concentrate all sorts of iniquity that exist on the earth. ... Who can measure the evils which arise from scandal, and slander, and profaneness, and perjury, and falsehood, and blasphemy, and obscenity ... by the tongue? Who can gauge the amount of broils, and contentions, and strifes, and wars, and suspicions, and enmities, and alienations among friends and neighbors, which it produces? Who can number the evils produced by the ‘honeyed’ words of the seducer; or by the tongue of the eloquent in the maintenance of error, and the defense of wrong? If [no one was able to speak], what a [great] portion of the crimes of the world would soon cease! If [we all] would speak only that which ought to be spoken, what a change would come over the face of human affairs!”

So, here’s our tongue--potentially a world of unrighteousness, and it’s “set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.” Our tongues occupy a position and have such a broad impact over our entire bodies that there’s no part of us that isn’t affected by what comes out of your mouth.

The tongue stains the whole body. Sometimes, it only takes one word to be able to identify the entire character of an individual. It “sets on fire the entire course of life”--a rather difficult image to unpack, but James seems to mean that, like a wheel that catches fire at the axle, the flames spread through the spokes to the outer rim, consuming the entire wheel. In other words, every aspect of your life becomes consumed by that fire that originates with the tongue.

Third, the tongue itself is “set on fire by hell.” “Hell” is an Old English word for the place of torment for the wicked after death. It’s a translation of the word, “Gehenna,” referring to the valley of Hinnom, south of Jerusalem. During the reign of the evil King Ahaz, it was the place where the Israelites worshiped the idol, Moloch, by burning their young children to it as a sacrifice.

When the Israelites returned from their captivity in Babylon, the place was so disgusting to them that they made it the place where they would throw all the filth of the city. In order to consume everything that was dumped there, they kept a fire continually burning.

One commentator notes that “The extreme loathsomeness of the place; the filth and putrefaction; the corruption of the atmosphere, and the lurid fires blazing by day and night, made it one of the most appalling and [fearful] objects with which a Jew was acquainted.”

Taken one step further, hell is the abode of Satan and his minions. How is it that the tongue that was once declared by God to be good when He first formed man from the dust has now become such a scourge to the world? Our enemy turns the immense powers of the tongue to chaos and destruction. As one commentator writes, “The old serpent imbues it with his own poison. He imparts to it his own diabolical agency. He is perpetually setting it on fire from hell.” Such is the image James uses to describe the source of the evil that comes out of our mouths.

Scripture carries many warnings about sins of the tongue. In Proverbs, chapter sixteen, verse 27, Solomon tells us that “A worthless man plots evil, and his speech is like a scorching fire. A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends.” In Ecclesiastes, chapter ten, beginning in verse twelve, we read, “The words of a wise man's mouth win him favor, but the lips of a fool consume him. The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness, and the end of his talk is evil madness.”

The Lord Jesus told His followers in Mark, chapter seven, verse fourteen: “Hear me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.” If an unspoken thought can defile--like lust or anger towards another person--even though it never displays itself through what we say, how much greater is the defilement that comes when that evil thought passes across

the tongue. When that happens, we become a channel through which Satan himself acts upon the hearts and minds of others. Is it possible for such a channel as our lips to escape responsibility for the havoc that Satan inflicts upon others through us?

Please don't think at this point that James is exaggerating the influence of our words. We've all seen how our words can bless or curse, calm a raging fire or throw more fuel on it, heal or hurt. All the more reason for us to be slow to speak and quick to listen.

James has a second illustration of the power of the tongue in verses seven and eight that carries an ominous warning. Not only can the tongue unleash a cataclysmic maelstrom of evil and destruction, it can't be restrained: "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."

If it's impossible to tame the tongue, why is James telling us this if there's nothing we can do about it? Don't miss what James actually says: "No human being can tame the tongue." He leaves us with another option of subduing this untamable beast. In chapter fifteen of his book entitled, "On Nature and Grace," Augustine wrote, "He does not say: None can tame the tongue; but *No man*; in order that, when it is tamed, we may acknowledge it to be effected by the mercy of God, the help of God, the grace of God." Alexander MacLaren writes, "Man's impossibilities are Christ's actualities. So we have here to fall back on James's earlier word, 'If any of you lack, ... let him ask of God, ... and it shall be given him.'" James's words humble us by showing us what human strength can never accomplish as they lead us to Christ, who forgives the words we regret and continues transforming the hearts from which they came. More on that later, but, for now, James wants us to know that taming the tongue is by no means something we can do on our own. Only God can transform our hearts and our speech that flows from our hearts.

Verse eight ends with these woeful words about the uncontrollable nature of the tongue: “It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” For the one who resists the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, the tongue, being under the control of Satan, just as every part of the body of an unbeliever is under his control, is unrestrained in the evil it produces. Paul recognized this when he wrote to the followers of Christ in Rome in chapter three, verse thirteen, about unbelievers, saying: “Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips”--quoting from Psalm 140, verse three, and concluding: “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”

Such is the awesome power that resides with the tongue. James recognizes that the tongue acts as a fire, a stain upon the entire body, an uncontrollable beast, and a deadly poison. As he speaks to those whom he longs to see become “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” as he said in verse four of the first chapter, he knows that wise, mature believers have the power--through the Holy Spirit--to prevent fires, remove stains, train wild animals, and neutralize poisons caused by the tongue; and they do that through their words, carefully chosen, thoughtfully expressed, lovingly spoken.

If they don’t use their words wisely, they will have contradicted the very faith they claim to possess and plunge themselves into unimaginable, moral chaos, which is the subject of the next three verses: “With it”--that is, the tongue--“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.” It’s a huge contradiction for someone who claims to have faith to speak in a way that fails to honor the Lord and doesn’t edify those who are made in His image and likeness.

First, someone praises, thanks, worships the One Who is both Lord and Father--the Sovereign God of creation from Whom everyone derives life and

Who gives us our very next heartbeat and the One with Whom we stand in such a unique, precious relationship, that we are able to address Him and know Him and relate to Him as Father.

If, from the same mouth, there come words of blessing and cursing, this ought not to be so. You can't blame it on stress, frustration, other people--whether your spouse, your children, your boss, your in-laws, your neighbor--or even a difficult day. The inconsistency of blessing God while cursing people made in His image points to a divided heart.

If words of blessing and cursing come out of the same mouth, it's not a problem of the mouth, it's a problem of the heart as Jesus said in Matthew, chapter fifteen, verse nineteen: "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person."

James has told us that, for those who claim to have faith but have no evidence--no fruit--of genuine faith, their form of faith is empty, lifeless, dead--incapable of saving them from eternal judgment. In the same way, the one who thinks he's religious and does not bridle his tongue--chapter one, verse 26--his religion is vain--empty, barren, worthless, dead. James now shows us how that's true.

Such a person's religion, worship, and declaration that goes no farther than to declare that God is One is a mockery and a contradiction. The one who blesses God and then turns around and curses his neighbor is a walking contradiction--a double-minded person as in verses seven and eight of the first chapter,--"unstable in all his ways." "He has made himself"--as one commentator writes--"He has made himself the channel of hellish influences. He cannot ... make himself the channel of heavenly influences, or become the offerer of holy sacrifices. The fires of Pentecost will not rest where the fires of Gehenna are working, nor can one who has become the minister of Satan at the same time be a minister to offer praise to God."

To emphasize the moral chaos of such contradictory speech even further--as if he needed any additional explanation to underscore the fundamental inconsistency of someone who speaks both blessings and curses--, he draws several, obvious word pictures for us. “Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water?” It was not uncommon in that day for desert springs to be tainted with salt or sulphur, and you can find several such instances in the Old Testament. James’ readers knew this, so the comparison would have been immediately understood: “No, everyone knows you don’t get both fresh water and salt water from the same spring.”

“Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs?” Here again, his readers were very familiar with fig trees, olive trees, and grapevines, and you would never find olives growing on a fig tree or figs growing on a grape vine. Never! Absolutely ridiculous!” These things are impossible in nature, and they’re equally absurd in personal morality. A fig-tree bears only figs, so the tongue ought to speak with only one kind of words--those that honor God our Father and edify others. These illustrations are very striking, and they show the absurdity of the kind of speech that James here condemns.

In his third illustration, James echoes what he said in the first: “Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water,” with the application that no tongue that’s been tainted with the bitterness of cursing others / can really honor the Lord. As a result, the prayers and praises of the double-minded person who pretends to “bless our Lord and Father” while at the same time cursing those “who are made in the likeness of the very God they claim to worship / are worse than worthless--they’re an insult and an outrage to God.

With these three illustrations, James takes us back to the beginning of his message about suppressing the desire to become teachers without the appropriate qualifications--including the moral restraint of the tongue. He’s reminded us of the power of the tongue; he’s shown us what a destructive force can be released by someone who doesn’t have a heart that’s being transformed

by the Holy Spirit and who can't control his untamable tongue; and he's shown us his conclusion that no one should put himself in the position of a teacher of others without the prudence, wisdom, discernment, discretion, and reverence found in a transformed heart.

These words are serious, solemn, grim, ominous, and perhaps even a little extreme for some Bible students. As a result, James has been accused of exaggerating the power of the tongue, but we all should know he's right. How in the world can we praise God and honor Him as our heavenly Father one moment, then turn right around and belittle, criticize, condemn, slander, malign, denigrate, or disparage someone who is made in the very image of the God we claim to worship? For the word, "curse" doesn't just mean using a curse word to speak of someone, it includes everything that brings a curse of grief, judgment, shame, embarrassment, humiliation, or emotional trauma that's multiplied a hundred times over if it's said in public.

"My brothers, [my sisters,] these things ought not to be so.

What makes up such a curse? Angry words directed at the person whose driving displeases us. Slandorous speech. Criticism poorly disguised as humor. Using profanity or other vulgar language. Telling explicit or dirty jokes. Verbally abusing your children or your spouse. Making your spouse or your children the butt of a joke or publicly demeaning them. Belittling those who aren't as well-off as you. Repeating a rumor masquerading as a prayer request. Lying. Exaggerating a story to make yourself appear more important. Calling someone a degrading or humiliating name. Using sarcasm to belittle or embarrass someone else. Using words to punish someone emotionally. Using racial, ethnic, or other derogatory slurs. Using words that destroy hope rather than offer encouragement. And the list goes on and on and on.

In speaking to the Pharisees about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, the Lord Jesus said in Matthew, chapter twelve, verse 35: "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings

forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

Mark Twain is credited with having said, “I can last two months on a good compliment,” but we all can probably recall a hurtful word from perhaps years ago that permanently altered the trajectory of our lives, and not for the better. One simple word changed everything, and, if the person were someone in a place of influence like James writes about, the impact was so much more damaging than if it had come from someone else.

Is James just pointing his finger at his readers and condemning them for their speech? No. He includes himself when he speaks--verse two: “we all stumble in many ways,” but the Holy Spirit is present in the lives of authentic believers to keep us from stumbling.

Allow me to share an example from my own life. When Susan and I led marriage retreats, I would tell this story, but never without publicly asking her permission first.

Sometime during our first year of marriage, Susan asked me a question, and I thought the answer was so obvious that I responded with a voice like Red Skelton’s Clem Kadiddlehopper with an obvious lisp: “Gee, Susan; I don’t know. What do you think.”

She didn’t speak to me for three days.

I begged her, time after time, to tell me what I had done, and, only after three days did she tell me, “You know what you did.”

After pleading and apologizing and asking her forgiveness and telling her I had no idea what I had done, she finally told me, “You made fun of the way I speak.” I was floored. I had absolutely no idea what she was talking about, and I was finally able to convince her that I really didn’t.

That's when she told me why it had hurt her so much. It seems that when she was in elementary school, she had a speech impediment--she had trouble pronouncing her "S"s. She had to go to speech therapy. Kids at school made fun of her, so she kept to herself and didn't talk much. Even answering the phone was a hardship: "Sergeant Strickland's quarters, Susan speaking." In being stupidly insensitive to a hurt she had carried for fifteen years, I had simply but unknowingly mocked her hidden pain. I had cursed her heart. No, I hadn't used a curse word, I just said something in a way that dragged her back to the curse she had lived under for so many years. This is just one example of what James is talking about here.

Some husbands would have blown it off, thinking that was in the far past, and she should have gotten over it. But she wasn't there yet, and it wasn't my place to put her there. It was my place to love her as Christ loved the Church as He gave Himself up for her.

We know how our words or the words of others can set on fire the entire course of life, and that fire is set, James says, by hell itself. Don't be Satan's accomplice in demeaning, hurting, cursing someone made in the image of God--someone for whom Christ died. To the genuine followers of Christ in Colossae, Paul wrote, "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person."

Cindi Murphy closes her comments with this reminder: "We don't merely need help choosing better words. We need [the Lord Jesus] Christ to forgive [us for] the words [we've] already spoken and transform the heart from which our next words will come."

"Jesus alone always spoke with perfect righteousness. His words were true, gracious, wise, and pure because they flowed from his perfectly righteous heart. Even when he was mocked, falsely accused, and condemned, "he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats" (1 Pet. 2:23 NIV).

Instead, he entrusted himself to the Father and continued in perfect obedience.”

“At the cross, Jesus bore the guilt of all our sin--including the angry, careless, dishonest, and destructive words we have spoken. He carried the judgment we deserved so that we could be forgiven and clothed in his righteousness.”

“[B]ecause Christ has borne our guilt, the words we regret [don’t] have the final word over us. We can confess them without hiding, defending ourselves, or explaining away what we said. We can receive his forgiveness and then seek forgiveness from the people our words have harmed.”

“And forgiveness isn’t the end of Christ’s work in us. He also gives us his Spirit, who continues working at the source of our speech--our hearts. As he makes us more like Christ, our words begin to change too.” “The gospel doesn’t merely change our vocabulary,” she says, “it transforms the source from which our words flow.”

Paul’s words found in Colossians, chapter three, beginning in the second verse are an excellent antidote to double-minded, wicked, hurtful, and ungodly speech. Writing to authentic followers of Christ who are being transformed by the Holy Spirit on a trajectory to becoming “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing,” Paul says: “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.”

Finally, here's a very practical test you can apply before you speak. Ask yourself first, Is it true? "Am I speaking honestly and accurately?" Second, is it kind? "Am I treating the other person with dignity?" Third, is it necessary? "Does this need to be said?" Fourth, is it constructive? "Will it help, encourage, correct, or edify the person I'm speaking to?" Fifth and most important, "Is it Christ-honoring? Does it reflect the character of Jesus?"

By way of transition from what James has said about our words to addressing our motivations, he writes in verse thirteen where our next lesson begins: "Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct"--which includes the words we speak--"let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom." Next week, we turn to the second half of chapter three where James will continue to call us to bear the fruits of an authentic faith as he leads us through a comparison of those whose lives are transformed by the wisdom God offers and those who choose to reject that wisdom in verses thirteen through eighteen.

As always, as it's still a good thing to do, keep calm, trust in the Lord, and wash your hands! God bless you!

The resources for this lesson include James: Christianity in Real Shoe Leather by Joel Gregory; Planting Roots unpublished manuscript, James: Rooted in Christ, by Cindi Murphy; The Epistle of St. James: The Greek Text with Introduction and Comments, by Joseph B. Mayor; Notes on the Bible by Albert Barnes (1834), text courtesy of Internet Sacred Texts Archive; The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges, text courtesy of BibleSupport.com; The Expositor's Bible, text courtesy of BibleSupport.com; The Expositor's Greek Testament - Nicoll, Text Courtesy of BibleSupport.com; Exposition of the Entire Bible by John Gill (1746-63), text courtesy of Internet Sacred Texts Archive; ICC New Testament commentary on selected books, Text Courtesy of BibleSupport.com; Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Critical, Doctrinal, and Homiletical (John Peter Lange) text courtesy of BibleSupport.com; Expositions Of Holy Scripture, Alexander MacLaren, text courtesy

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