



Book of James

Chapter 3

Theme: God tests faith by the tongue

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Theme: God tests faith by the tongue

Deeds of ministry: All Christians are also called into ministry, each according to our gifts; but all to obedience.

The world's smallest—but largest—troublemaker.

James has explained to us characteristics of the mature Christian:

Chapter 1: He is patient in trouble;

Chapter 2: He practices truth.

Chapter 3: He has control over his tongue.

Missler: Controlling and Energizing Faith

We touched on the venomous nature of gossip in an earlier session; but James has more to say about this untamable member.

In James 1:19 he warns us to be “swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.

In James 1:26 he emphasizes that the believer who does not bridle his tongue is not truly religious.

(When we examine passages like 4:1 and 4:11-12, we can infer that this gang had some rough meetings!)

The power of speech:

For praise, prayer, and leadership.

But also, lies, deceit, and manipulation.

James gives us six pictures to reveal three powers of the tongue.¹

James 3:1

My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.

People in a position of leadership, and teaching, are in a position of accountability as well as responsibility.

LAN: Teaching was a highly valued and respected profession in Jewish culture, and many Jews who embraced Christianity wanted to become teachers. James warned that although it is good to aspire to teach, the teachers' responsibility is great because their words and example affect others' spiritual lives. If you are in a teaching or leadership role, how are you affecting those you lead?²

¹ Chuck Missler, Notes on James, khouse.org

² Life Application Notes

we shall receive a stricter judgment: James does not give the warning of judgment to others without applying it to himself. **Teachers** will stand before the judgment seat of Christ and be judged more strictly than others. Their greater influence translates into greater responsibility. Judgment here most likely does not refer to eternal separation from God; rather it suggests a thorough judgment of teachers before Christ (Matt. 5:19; Rom. 14:10–12). Leadership imposes responsibility.³

In this verse James expresses himself with a directness that is difficult to convey in translation. The position of teacher or rabbi was highly esteemed in the Jewish and early Christian communities, and thus many were attracted to it. James states that not many should be teachers. He then includes himself among the teachers by saying that “we” shall have applied to us “a stricter judgment.” The comparative adjective “stricter” supports the idea of degrees of treatment at the judgment, as suggested elsewhere (Luke 10:12 ff.; 12:47ff.). James wants his readers to weigh carefully the responsibility of teaching others the word of God as an awesome task that should not be accepted without prayerful consideration.⁴

[masters] Greek: *didaskaloi* (GSN-1320), teachers (note, Acts 13:1; cp. Luke 12:48). From Greek 1321 (*didasko*); an *instructor* (genitive or special) :- doctor, master, teacher.

[condemnation] *krima*, Greek 2917, *kree'-mah*; from Greek 2919 (*krino*); a *decision* (the function or the effect, for or against [“crime”]) :- avenge, condemned, condemnation, damnation, + go to law, judgment.

Clarke: Be not many masters—Do not affect the teacher’s office, for many wish to be teachers who have more need to learn. There were many teachers or rabbins among the Jews, each affecting to have THE truth, and to draw disciples after him. We find a caution against such persons, and of the same nature with that of St. James, in Pirkey Aboth, c. i. 10: Love labor, and hate the rabbin’s office.

This caution is still necessary; there are multitudes, whom God has never called, and never can call, because he has never qualified them for the work, who earnestly wish to get into the priest’s office. And of this kind, in opposition to St. James, we have many masters—persons who undertake to show us the way of salvation, who know nothing of that ways and are unsaved themselves. These are found among all descriptions of Christians, and have been the means of bringing the ministerial office into contempt. Their case is awful; they shall receive greater condemnation than common sinners; they have not only sinned in thrusting themselves into that office to which God has never called them, but through their insufficiency the flocks over whom they have assumed the mastery perish for lack of knowledge, and their blood will God require at the watchman’s hand. A man may have this mastery according to the law of the land, and yet not have it according to the Gospel; another may affect to have it according to the Gospel, because he dissents from the religion of the state, and not have it according to Christ. Blockheads are common, and knaves and hypocrites may be found everywhere.⁵

³ The Nelson Study Bible

⁴ Believer’s Study Bible

⁵ Adam Clarke’s Commentary on the New Testament

Barnes: My brethren, be not many masters. "Be not many of you teachers." The evil referred to is that where *many* desired to be teachers, though but *few* could be qualified for the office, and though, in fact, comparatively few were required. A small number, well qualified, would better discharge the duties of the office, and do more good, than many would; and there would be great evil in having many crowding themselves unqualified into the office.⁶

Barnes: Knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation, Or rather, *a severer judgment*; that is, we shall have a severer trial, and give a stricter account. The word here used does not necessarily mean *condemnation*, but *judgment, trial, account*; and the consideration which the apostle suggests is not that those who were public teachers would be *condemned*, but that there would be a much more solemn account to be rendered by them than by other men, and that they ought duly to reflect on this in seeking the office of the ministry.

Church Leaders, Teacher—Some may want to serve in the church for all too human reasons such as pride and a desire for status. James warned that not many should become teachers. Teachers are responsible and will be held strictly accountable for their teaching and its effects on believers. Therefore, they will be subject to greater condemnation in the judgment. This holds true for anyone who assumes responsibility for the spiritual welfare of the congregation. Teachers should be characterized by wisdom (Col 1:28) and should be humble and not argumentative (Jas 3:13-18). Their teaching must be both sound and godly (1 Ti 1:13; 6:2-3). Their life-styles must conform to what they profess (1 Ti 4:2; 2 Ti 3:10).⁷

A note of caution (v. 1)

This note may well come as a shock to most of us. There are so many things that James could have cautioned his readers about, and the thing he chooses is teaching!

He writes, 'My brethren, let not many of you become teachers ...' (v. 1). We have a hard time believing that James would say such a thing because we know how very difficult it is for most churches to find enough teachers. This is a verse that many pastors and leaders would prefer to keep hidden. But it is here, and we must not ignore it.

Why did James think it necessary to include this? We can safely say that he had no desire to make it harder for churches to find teachers. Rather he was warning his readers about the terrible possibility of taking up the task of teaching with the wrong motive.

In those times, much dignity and acclaim came to those who were teachers. The people in those days were taught to regard teachers with utmost respect.

Citing William Barclay, Kent Hughes offers this explanation: 'The title *rabbi* meant "My great one", and those holding that office were accorded the greatest respect. One's duty to help a *rabbi* exceeded even the duty to help one's parents. In fact, should a *rabbi* and one's father and mother be captured by an enemy, duty demanded that the *rabbi* be ransomed first!'

Such respect for teachers created a temptation for many to take up the task so that they might receive the fawning of an adoring public.

⁶ Barnes' Notes On the New Testament

⁷ Disciple's Study Bible

Our appeal, then, to all who are interested in teaching is simply this: by all means, take up the work, but make sure you are doing it for the right reason. We are not to teach to satisfy our own ego needs, but to bring glory to God and to deliver his Word accurately to the eternal benefit of those who hear us.

We cannot leave this point without noting the reason James attached to this note of caution, namely, stricter judgement (v. 1). It is an awesome thing to stand before eternity-bound people to unfold and explain the Word of God! I sometimes find myself shuddering as I think of the magnitude and seriousness of the task. And I shudder as I observe so many who go about the task with flippancy and lightness, conducting themselves as mere entertainers who are out to get a laugh.

I also shudder when I hear about teachers who have such little regard for their task that they do not adequately prepare, or they use the time set apart for the teaching of the Word of God to discuss mere trivialities.

I shudder when I hear teachers and preachers joke about things that are sacred. And I shudder when I hear a person set aside the clear teaching of the Bible so that he or she can be in line with current thinking.

There are many, many ways in which we can misuse our tongues—blasphemy, lying, gossiping, profanity—but none could possibly be more serious than using them to misrepresent and distort the Word of God!

We had better know this very well: God takes the teaching of his Word seriously, and so should we! If we doubt that God takes the matter seriously, we need only read Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 3:10–15. He tells us that teachers can build with gold, silver and precious stones or with wood, hay and stubble. The coming day of judgement will reveal the kind of work that we have done, and those who have built with the wood, hay and stubble will see their work utterly consumed and will realize that they have accomplished absolutely nothing!

We cannot leave this point without paying tribute to those teachers who have served so faithfully and diligently. Poor teachers do much harm, but who can calculate the good achieved by conscientious teachers? Eternity itself will finally reveal the value of such teachers.⁸

McGee: *Masters* means “teachers.” James is saying that a teacher has a greater responsibility, and the reason for that is the grave danger of teaching the wrong thing. I am absolutely amazed and overwhelmed at the way so many Christian folk fall for all kinds of teaching, particularly that which has to do with prophecy. All a teacher needs today is a glib tongue. People are accepting all kinds of methods and cults and “isms”; yet many of these teachers, as far as the total Word of God is concerned, are absolutely ignorant. I rejoice in home Bible classes, and I think they have filled a real vacuum that existed, but I find that some of the leaders are teaching all kinds of vagaries, giving the wrong interpretation of Scripture. They need to know more of the Word of God than they do.

The ease with which people fall for their teachings has ministered to a great deal of conceit and pride on the part of many teachers. One young fellow that I had the privilege of leading to Christ has gone off on a tangent in his teaching. I tried to get him to study

⁸ Ellsworth, R. (2009). *Opening up James* (104–106). Leominster: Day One Publications.

the Word, but he did not. He has now started a class, and he is very glib of tongue. Someone in his class went to him and said, “Do you know that what you have taught is contrary to most Bible teachers and especially to the man who led you to the Lord?” The young man replied, “Oh, Dr. McGee? Well, maybe he needs to correct *his* theology.” Well, frankly, maybe I do. I am amazed the more I study the Word of God. The thing that discourages me is that it reveals my ignorance, not my knowledge. I realize I have a long way to go, but the young man who made that statement has even farther to go. However, he does not recognize his own ignorance.

I am reminded of what a preacher said of another young man who had just started out in the ministry. When someone pointed out his prideful attitude, the preacher said of the young man, “Yes, he thinks he is the fourth person of the Trinity.” It is so easy for a preacher or teacher to become proud.

The tongue is very dangerous. James is saying here, “My brethren, be not many teachers.” Don’t think that the minute you become a child of God you can start a Bible class and teach the Book of Revelation.

“Knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.” Frankly, it is frightening to realize that God will judge us for the way in which we teach His Word, and we will be under His condemnation if our teaching is wrong. My friend, the more opportunity you have to give out the Word of God, the greater is your responsibility to God Himself.⁹

ESV: Teachers were important in the early church (Acts 2:42; Rom. 12:7; 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11), and those who were ambitious sought teacher status for the wrong reasons. However, with greater responsibility comes greater expectations by God (Luke 12:48; Heb. 13:17), and teachers will be judged with greater strictness (lit., “greater judgment”), since they are accountable for more.

Spurgeon: Men are too ready to set up for teachers and censors, but if they knew the increased responsibility of the position they would prefer to be learners.

BT: The Greek word used here for masters (teachers, NIV) refers to more than just a simple teacher. It is one who uses words and actions to communicate the good news of the Kingdom of God to others. Who falls under that definition? This can include many members of the church as they teach one another and as they present the gospel to the lost world. It certainly refers to the ministers, pastors, teachers, and leaders. This letter is written to all of us, not just Sunday School teachers or preachers. Why would all Christians, who know the Truth, be judged more severely? With knowledge comes responsibility to use it wisely. James concludes this chapter by pointing this out. Simply stated, those who have taken positions of authority in the church are subject to a higher standard of judgment, and when they abuse those positions, the consequences are significant. Pastors, deacons, and teachers should be particularly aware of this statement as they observe their own motives and actions within the church body. The word translated “condemnation” in the KJV is a harsh interpretation of the Greek *krima*, which refers to the final decision made by a judge upon hearing the complete case. Our modern English tends to imply condemnation as separation from God, an inappropriate

⁹ McGee, J. V. (1997). *Thru the Bible commentary* (electronic ed.) (Jas 3:1). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

application in this verse. A Christian will not be condemned to hell for any action, spoken or otherwise, as their salvation is secured by the Holy Spirit. However, Christians are responsible before God for their words and actions, and there is much scripture to defend the argument that God is in a position to discipline his children. Just as parents must make judgments pertaining to the actions of their young children that lead to reward or discipline, God makes those same judgments on his children. Just as an older child is held to a higher level of expectation than a baby, a teacher or preacher is held to a higher level of expectation, and should not be acting like a spiritual baby any longer. At this point James is turning the attention of the reader to the impact that their behavior is having on one another. In particular, he is referring to the ways in which our communication with one another can be destructive. What we say in our words reveals a lot of who we are. When one is living a false faith, it is evident when words do not match actions. A false faith is exposed when the words from an individual contradict God's Holy Spirit of love. A false faith as described in the previous verses may be exposed as one is conceited and judgmental (magisterial) with their words. Even those with true faith are subject to err in the same way. We are warned against a dictating, censorious, or mischievous use of the tongue.

We are not to use our tongues so as to lord it over others. Jesus is to be the Lord of the church, not us. Likewise, we must not make our own sentiments a standard by which to try all others. If the unity of the body of believers comes from Christ, then any effort to destroy that unity is evil, and church members who would disrupt that unity in order to attain their own ends are only agents of the evil one, and James would wonder about the integrity of their statement of faith.

Here we find an implication of responsibility that each Christian carries: a responsibility to demonstrate spiritual leadership rather than personal leadership, and failure to do so will bring hurt and disunity to the body, and condemnation by God. Listen to the Spirit before you utilize your authority as a pastor, teacher, or deacon, etc.¹⁰

James 3:2

For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, *and* able also to bridle the whole body.

Missler: It shocks me to watch the ostensible “Christians” who slander and libel other members of the Body of Christ, especially in newsletters and the like... It also disturbs me to find that the business ethics in the professional Christian world appears no better—perhaps even worse—than the secular world...

[offend all] We all stumble or trip over many things.

In his speech; in the use of his tongue.

¹⁰ http://www.biblicaltheology.com/jam/59_00_00.html

[**perfect**] *teleios*, Greek 5046, *tel'-i-os*; from Greek 5056 (*telos*); *complete* (in various applications of labor, growth, mental and moral character, etc.); neuter (as noun, with Greek 3588 (*ho*)) *completeness* :- of full age, man, perfect.

Clarke: In many things we offend all — We all stumble or trip. Dr. Barrow very properly observes: “As the general course of life is called a way, and particular actions steps, so going on in a regular course of right action is walking uprightly; and acting amiss, tripping or stumbling.” There are very few who walk so closely with God, and inoffensively with men, as never to stumble; and although it is the privilege of every follower of God to be sincere and without offense to the day of Christ, yet few of them are so.

Barnes: For in many things we offend all. We all offend. The word here rendered *offend*, means to stumble, to fall; then to err, to fail in duty; and the meaning here is, that all were liable to commit error, and that this consideration should induce men to be cautious in seeking an office where an error would be likely to do so much injury. The particular thing, doubtless, which the apostle had in his eye, was the peculiar liability to commit error, or to do wrong with the tongue. Of course, this liability is very great in an office where the *very business* is public speaking. If anywhere the improper use of the tongue will do mischief, it is in the office of a religious teacher; and to show the danger of this, and the importance of caution in seeking that office, the apostle proceeds to show what mischief the *tongue* is capable of effecting.

Barnes: The same is a perfect man. Perfect in the sense in which the apostle immediately explains himself; that he is able to keep every other member of his body in subjection. His object is not to represent the man as absolutely spotless in every sense, and as wholly free from sin, for he had himself just said that "all offend in many things;" but the design is to show that if a man can control his tongue, he has complete dominion over himself, as much as a man has over a horse by the bit, or as a steersman has over a ship if he has hold of the rudder. He is perfect in that sense, that he has complete control over himself, and will not be liable to error in anything. The design is to show the important position which the tongue occupies, as governing the whole man.

McGee: “For in many things we offend all” means that in many ways we all stumble. All of us do—there is no exception to that.

“If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man.” The word *perfect* means he is a full-grown Christian as he should be—just as a baby grows up, becomes a little child and matures to full adulthood.

James says the perfect man is “able also to bridle the whole body.” In other words, if he can control his speech, he can control his entire body, in fact, his whole life. The tongue lifts man from the animal world. It keeps him from being a gibbering ape or an aping parrot. Man is not an inarticulate animal or a mockingbird. Man can put thought into words; he can express himself; he can be understood; he can communicate on the highest level. The tongue is a badge which you and I wear—it identifies us. It is the greatest index to life. It is the table of contents of our lives.

Our tongues give us away; they tell who we are. Quite a few years ago I was rushing with my wife and little girl from a conference at Salt Lake City to a conference in the San Francisco Bay area. As we came over the High Sierras and Donner Pass, we stopped at a little town—I don't even know the name of it—and pulled into a filling station. I stepped out of the car and said to the young man there, "Fill 'er up!" That's all I said, but as I was looking out at those mountains and the lovely scenery, I became conscious that he was eyeing me. Finally, I turned to him and smiled. He said to me, "Are you Dr. McGee?" I said, "I sure am. Do I know you?" He said, "No." I said, "Do you know me?" He said, "No. I've never seen, you before, but up here, especially during the wintertime when we are all snowed in, we listen to you every Sunday night on the radio. We've been doing it for years. I'd know your voice anywhere." I've had that same experience a number of times. You see, my tongue gives me away.

Remember the maid who said to Simon Peter, "... thy speech betrayeth thee" (Matt. 26:73)—he could not deny that he was from Galilee. Your speech tells who you are; your tongue gives you away. It tells where you came from. It tells whether you are ignorant or educated, cultured or crude, whether you are clean or unclean, whether you are vulgar or refined, whether you are a believer or a blasphemer, whether you are a Christian or a non-Christian, whether you are guilty or not guilty. My friend, I am of the opinion that if you had a tape-recorded message of everything you have said this past month, you would not want the world to hear it.¹¹

ESV: in what he says. A person's words reflect his character and thus are a key to his whole being. James emphasizes the importance of good works but also acknowledges that all Christians stumble (a metaphor for sinning; Gk. *ptaiō*, translated "fails" in 2:10) in many ways. James's call for good works, therefore, must not be seen as expecting perfection. When James says that a person who can control his mouth is a perfect man, he probably has absolute perfection in view. It is a perfection, however, that will be attainable only in heaven. Still, believers should always seek to grow in holiness.

BT: The grammar used in this sentence forms an explanation for the previous one. The primary tool of the preacher and the teacher is the voice, the tongue. It is with the tongue that most of the teaching and preaching takes place. The Greek word for "offend" refers to a sin of stumbling, rather than an egregious act of rebellion. If anyone can manage his life such that he never commits such a sin of the tongue, that person demonstrates a level of self-control that, in turn, can bridle the entire body. This argument implies that the tongue is the most difficult part of the body to control, and few would argue with that. Consequently, if one can control their tongue, they can also control the rest of their "body", or the rest of their life. It will be evident that James is very adamant about the power that the tongue has to destroy the work of the Spirit in the congregation of believers, and the need to bring it under control.¹²

¹¹ McGee, J. V. (1997). *Thru the Bible commentary* (electronic ed.) (Jas 3:2). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

¹² http://www.biblicaltheology.com/jam/59_00_00.html

James 3:3

Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body.

A tiny bit can control a powerful horse. Words lead to deeds, in ourselves, and in others. It can accomplish great things, and launch great disasters.

[bits in the horses' mouths] Small things that are powerful:

1. Bits that guide horses (James 3:3)
2. Helms that guide great ships (James 3:4)
3. Little fires that kindle great ones
4. Tongues that boast great things (James 3:5-8)¹³

Clarke: Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths—In order to show the necessity of regulating the tongue, to which St. James was led by his exhortation to them who wished to thrust themselves into the teacher's office, supposing, because they had the gift of a ready flow of speech, that therefore they might commence teachers of Divine things; he proceeds to show that the tongue must be bridled as the horse, and governed as the ships; because, though it is small, it is capable of ruling the whole man; and of irritating and offending others.

Barnes: Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, The meaning of this simple illustration is, that as we control a horse by the bit- though the bit is a small thing- so the body is controlled by the tongue. He who has a proper control over his tongue can govern his whole body, as he who holds a bridle governs and turns about the horse.

LAN: What you say and what you *don't* say are both important. Proper speech is not only saying the right words at the right time, but it is also controlling your desire to say what you shouldn't. Examples of an untamed tongue include gossiping, putting others down, bragging, manipulating, false teaching, exaggerating, complaining, flattering, and lying. Before you speak, ask, "Is what I want to say true? Is it necessary? Is it kind?"

McGee: The illustration James uses here is the horse. It was David who said, "I said, I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue: I will keep my mouth with a bridle, while the wicked is before me" (Ps. 39:1). In other words, David said that because he wanted to give the right kind of testimony, he would put a bridle on his mouth. My friend, there are a lot of Christians today who ought to have a bridle put on their mouths.

The bridle bits are not impressive in size, but they can hold a high-spirited horse in check and keep him from running away. If you are old enough, you may have recollections of the horse-and-buggy days. I can recall seeing a horse run away, turn over a buggy, and bring death and destruction to a family. In the same way, the tongue can run away. Someone said of another individual, "His mind starts his tongue to wagging, and

¹³ Dake Study Notes, Dake's Study Bible

then goes off and leaves it.” We should not go through life like that—there needs to be a bridle for the tongue.¹⁴

The 'bridle' of verse 2 refers to the bridle that is placed on a horse or other beast of burden. James goes on to give some examples of what it means to subject something to a bridle. A horse is a large and powerful animal, capable of causing brutal injury if left to its own devices. Consequently, there is a need for the horse to be bridled, so that it can be guided, giving its power a useful purpose. A bridled horse is no less powerful than one that is unbridled. The difference is that the power of a bridled horse is focused as it serves its master as it serves a meaningful and positive purpose., The unfocused power of the unbridled horse is simply expended in random acts of self-will and violence. The bridled horse is following the lead of one who is guiding it with superior knowledge and wisdom.

The works of the tongue follow this metaphor closely. A tongue that is unbridled by God's wisdom as taught by His Word and the Holy Spirit's promptings is like the untamed horse, full of random acts of self-will and violence. When the tongue is brought under the Lordship of the Spirit, its power is focused by one with superior knowledge and wisdom, allowing the speaker to be a useful participant in God's kingdom.¹⁵

James 3:4

Behold also the ships, which though *they be* so great, and *are* driven of fierce winds, yet *are* they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth.

Missler: “Loose lips sink ships.” They also wreck lives.

A small helm—rudder—can steer a huge ship.

Both the bit and the rudder can overcome contrary forces: the wild nature of the horse; the wind and currents that would drive a ship off course; etc.

A bit and a rudder can affect the lives of others. A runaway horse or a shipwreck can mean injury or death to pedestrians or passengers.

A few words can affect the lives of an accused, his family, and his friends; they can place a nation at war; they can redirect the life of a child.

Peter preached at Pentecost and 3,000 souls came to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. (Acts 2)

On April 21, 1855, Edward Kimball went into a Boston shoe store and led young Dwight L. Moody to Christ.

Prov 15:1 - *“A soft answer turneth away wrath; but grievous words stir up anger.”*

Prov 12:22 - *“Lying lips are an abomination tot he Lord.”*

Prov 10:19 - *“In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin: but he that refraineth his lips is wise.”*

¹⁴ McGee, J. V. (1997). *Thru the Bible commentary* (electronic ed.) (Jas 3:3). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

¹⁵ http://www.biblicaltheology.com/jam/59_00_00.html

[**governor**] *euthuno*, Greek 2116, *yoo-thoo'-no*; from Greek 2117 (*euthus*); to *straighten* (*level*); technically to *steer* :- governor, make straight.

Barnes: Behold also the ships. This illustration is equally striking and obvious. A ship is a large object. It seems to be unmanageable by its vastness, and it is also impelled by driving storms. Yet it is easily managed by a small rudder; and he that has control of that, has control of the ship itself. So with the tongue. It is a small member as compared with the body; in its size not unlike the rudder as compared with the ship. Yet the proper control of the tongue in respect to its influence on the whole man, is not unlike the control of the rudder in its power over the ship.

McGee: Large ships can be controlled by a little rudder which few people even see. A fierce storm may drive a ship, but a little rudder can control it. The tongue can also change the course of our lives. Men have been ruined by the tongue; many the fair name of a woman has been wrecked by some gossipy tongue.

James says that the tongue is more dangerous than a runaway horse or a storm at sea. I believe that liquor is eating at the vitals of our nation today, but did you know that the tongue is condemned more in Scripture than alcoholism is condemned? Liquor and alcoholism may bring our nation down, yet the tongue is even more dangerous than that. Proverbs 6:16–17 says, “These six things doth the LORD hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him: A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood.” A lying tongue is one of the seven things God hates.

The tongue can really get us into trouble—there is no question about that. Again, someone has put it in words like this:

A careless word may kindle strife;
A cruel word may wreck a life.
A bitter word may hate instill;
A brutal word may smite and kill.
A gracious word may smooth the way;
A joyous word may light the day.
A timely word may lessen stress;
A loving word may heal and bless.
—Author unknown

I was very impressed when I read General Montgomery’s farewell words addressed to the Eighth Army in Italy following World War II. He said to them, “Command must be personal and it must be verbal; otherwise it will have no success, because it is wrapped up in the human factor.” Continuing, he said this: “I often have at the back of my mind a passage from the New Testament, ‘Except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken?’” (see 1 Cor. 14:9). That is the kind of tongue I want to have as I teach the Word of God—the tongue that both a little child and the older folk can understand. Someone asked me one time, “How in the world can the same message bring a nine-year-old child and a university professor to the Lord?” I must confess, I do not know the answer to that question. But I do believe that God blesses His Word and that it must be taught simply. We must put the cookies on the bottom shelf

where the kiddies can get them. God did not say, “Feed My giraffes”; He said, “Feed My lambs” (see John 21:15).¹⁶

ESV: Bits in a horse's mouth and the **small rudder** on a ship are examples of very small things that control large objects. The tongue, one of the smaller organs of the body, has a similar control over everything a person is and does.

A second example of bridling is the influence of the rudder on a boat. The rudder is a small, movable, part of the boat's tiller, a blade that cuts through the water beneath the rear of the boat. When the rudder is turned, a small amount of water is pushed to the side, turning the boat. Just as the rudder is a small part of the boat, the tongue is also a small part of the body. Governing a tiller properly provides control over the ship in the greatest of storms. How does this correlate to governing the tongue? The tiller of a boat defines its direction. The tongue defines the direction of the person who wields it. When one listens to another person's words in a variety of situations, it does not take long to see the true direction in which that person is heading. Just as we can "see through" the hypocrisy of others by the things they say, others will see through our own hypocrisy.

Like the bridle on the horse, the rudder does not stop the progress of the ship, but simply guides it on its appropriate course. Likewise, the tongue that is brought under the control of the Holy Spirit can be guided to good purpose. There is no other source of guidance that is appropriate for the Christian.¹⁷

James 3:5

Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!

Missler: A fire can begin with just a small spark, but it can destroy a city:

A fire [reportedly] started in the O'Leary barn in Chicago at 8:30 p.m., October 8, 1871; because that fire spread, over 100,000 people were left homeless, 17,500 buildings were destroyed, and 300 people died. It cost the city over \$400 million—and a dollar was worth more than 20 times as much back then.

[Ironically, that same day a dry autumn spark ignited a raging fire in the North Woods of Wisconsin which burned for an entire month, taking more lives than the famed Chicago fire. A veritable firestorm destroyed billions of yards of precious timber—all from one spark.]

Our words can start fires.

The tongue “*setteth on fire the course of nature.*” James 3:6

Barnes: Even so, the tongue is a little member. Little compared with the body-as the bit or the rudder is, compared with the horse or the ship;

¹⁶ McGee, J. V. (1997). *Thru the Bible commentary* (electronic ed.) (Jas 3:4). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

¹⁷ http://www.biblicaltheology.com/jam/59_00_00.html

Clarke: Boasteth great things—That is, can do great things, whether of a good or evil kind. He seems to refer here to the powerful and all commanding eloquence of the Greek orators: they could carry the great mob whithersoever they wished; calm them to peaceableness and submission, or excite them to furious sedition.

Behold, how great a matter—See what a flame of discord and insubordination one man, merely by his persuasive tongue, may kindle among the common people.

Barnes: Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! Marg., *wood*. The Greek word means a wood, forest, grove; and then fire-wood, fuel. This is the meaning here. The sense is, that a very little fire is sufficient to ignite a large quantity of combustible materials, and that the tongue produces effects similar to that. A spark will kindle a lofty pile; and a word spoken by the tongue may set a neighbourhood or a village "in a flame."

Small but powerful is the tongue, like a *bit*, a *rudder*, and a *small fire* (spark).

Chuck Smith: So in talking about the tongue, it's a very small part of our anatomy. But yet what trouble it can get us into. What fires it can spark. The tongue is something that has a capacity for great blessings or for great evil. We can use our tongues to bless people, to build them up, to encourage them, or we can use our tongues to destroy them. And he likens the tongue though it is such a small part of the body and yet able to do such great damage move so many things like the bridle in a horse's mouth, small but yet you can move that big horse around with just a little bridle in its mouth. The rudder on a ship, a small part of the ship, but yet it turns the ship. A huge ship turned by such a small rudder, so our tongues can really control in a sense our whole lives. An especially if we don't seek to control the tongue.¹⁸

We are taught to dread an unruly tongue. Compare:

Eccl. 5:6, "Do not let your mouth lead you into sin."

What are some examples of damage done by the unruly, self-centered tongue? People are misled and hurt. The affairs of the church are often thrown into confusion. Relationships are damaged or broken, and the testimony for Christ is lost. Entire congregations can lose their testimony to the lost world when they are characterized by vocal infighting. Such churches will gain few members and see few conversions to the faith.

Why is the tongue so dangerous and powerful a weapon? The tongue is our primary means of communication. It is a representation of who we are, the authority that we have been given, and the influence we have in the community. Words have power to change other's behaviors. If I am walking down the street and see you walking ahead of me, what will you do when I shout your name? You will turn. I just influenced your behavior. Some ancient cultures did not reveal their names to strangers because they felt

¹⁸ Pastor Chuck Smith, Calvary Chapel, Costa Mesa, CA

to do so was to give this power away. The tongue can produce great damage. James goes on to develop the metaphor of the fire of the unwise tongue.¹⁹

James 3:6

And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell.

Missler: Our tongue has more destructive power than a thermonuclear bomb: the bomb's power is only physical and temporal; the tongue's power is spiritual and eternal.

In fact, a tongue controls the bomb.

It is amazing how, when certain people in a church or a ministry organization leave or are replaced, what a beautiful spirit of harmony and love takes over.

Prov 26:20-21 - *“Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out: so where there is no talebearer, the strife ceaseth.”*

The tongue can cause great disasters. From sin on the inside, or pressures on the outside. Fiery words can defile a home, a church, or a schoolroom.

One of the sorrows that our Lord had to bear was the way His enemies talked about Him. They called Him “a man gluttonous and a winebibber”

(Mt 11:19). When He performed miracles, they said He was in league with Satan. Even on the cross, His enemies threw vicious taunts into His face.

[course of nature] Greek: *trochos* (GSN-5164), wheel. Only here. The circle of human life is continually excited by the tongue unless it is kept sanctified. Evil surmisings, misrepresentations, falsehoods, jealousies, envyings, wrath, and malice, all form part of the destroying flames of fire from the tongue of the ungodly.

[hell] Greek: *geena* (GSN-1067) (Luke 12:5). The whole course of life is set on fire of hell. This refers to the anger and violent passions of wrath related to the vile language of the tongue. It also pictures the confusion and misery caused by the tongue—like the misery of hell.

Clarke: The tongue is a fire—It is often the instrument of producing the most desperate contentions and insurrections.

Clarke: A world of iniquity—This is an unusual form of speech, but the meaning is plain enough; WORLD signifies here a mass, a great collection, an abundance. We use the term in the same sense—a world of troubles, a world of toil, a world of anxiety; for great troubles, oppressive toil, most distressing anxiety.

Barnes: A world of iniquity. A little world of evil in itself. This is a very expressive phrase, and is similar to one which we often employ, as when we speak of a town as being a *world* in miniature. We mean by it that it is an epitome of the world; that all that

¹⁹ http://www.biblicaltheology.com/jam/59_00_00.html

there is in the work is represented there on a small scale. So when the tongue is spoken of as being "a world of iniquity," it is meant that 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. And what evil is there which may not be originated or fomented by the tongue? What else is there that might with so much propriety be represented as a little world of iniquity? With all the good which it does, who can estimate the amount of evil which it causes. Who can measure the evils which arise from scandal, and slander, and profaneness, and perjury, and falsehood, and blasphemy, and obscenity, and the inculcation of error, 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 neighbours, 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 defence of wrong? If all men were dumb, what a portion of the crimes of the world would soon cease! If all men would speak only that which ought to be spoken, what a change would come over the face of human affairs!

Barnes: So is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body. It stains or pollutes the whole body. It occupies a position and relation so no portion which is not affected by it. Of the truth of this, no one can have any doubt. There is nothing else pertaining to us as moral and intellectual beings, which exerts such an influence over ourselves as the tongue. A man of pure conversation is understood and felt to be pure in every respect; but who has any confidence in the virtue of the blasphemer, or the man of obscene lips, or the calumniator and slanderer? We always regard such a man as corrupt to the core.

Barnes: And setteth on fire the course of nature. The margin is, "the *wheel* of nature." The Greek word also means *a wheel*, or anything made for revolving and running. Then it means the course run by a wheel; a circular course or circuit. The word rendered *nature*, (*γενεσις*.) means, *procreation, birth, nativity*; and therefore the phrase means, literally, *the wheel of birth*-that is, the wheel which is set in motion at birth, and which runs on through life.

Barnes: And it is set on fire of hell. Hell, or Gehenna, is represented as a place where the fires continually burn: Matthew 5:22. The idea here is, that that which causes the tongue to do so much evil derives its origin from hell. Nothing could better characterize much of that which the tongue does, than to say that it has its origin in hell, and has the spirit which reigns there. The very spirit of that world of fire and wickedness-a spirit of falsehood, and slander, and blasphemy, and pollution-seems to inspire the tongue. The *image* which seems to have been before the mind of the apostle was that of a torch which enkindles and burns everything as it goes along-a torch itself lighted at the fires of hell. One of the most striking descriptions of the woes and curses which there may be in hell, would be to portray the sorrows caused on the earth by the tongue.

LAN: James compares the damage the tongue can do to a raging fire—the tongue's wickedness has its source in hell itself. The uncontrolled tongue can do terrible damage. Satan uses the tongue to divide people and pit them against one another. Idle and hateful

words are damaging because they spread destruction quickly, and no one can stop the results once they are spoken. We dare not be careless with what we say, thinking we can apologize later, because even if we do, the scars remain. A few words spoken in anger can destroy a relationship that took years to build. Before you speak, remember that words are like fire—you can neither control nor reverse the damage they can do.

McGee: This is where I got the title for my little book on this third chapter of James, *Hell on Fire*. That is what the tongue can be and is in many cases. There are those who have questioned my use of the word *hell*, arguing that it is not properly translated in this verse. The Greek word used here is *gehenna*; it is not *sheol*. It refers to the valley of Hinnom where the fire never went out. This word is used only twelve times in the New Testament; the Lord Jesus used it eleven times, and James used it once. This is a correct translation: the tongue is “set on fire of *hell*.”

It is quite impressive that James compares the tongue to a fire. I do not know whether you have ever seen a forest fire, but each summer out here in California we have an epidemic of them. They are very devastating, and many times absolutely uncontrollable; they have to burn themselves out in many instances.

Fire has been, of course, one of the greatest friends of man and nature. Some historians say that civilization began when man discovered fire. When it is under control, it warms our bodies, it cooks our food, and it generates power to turn the wheels of industry. It is dangerous, though, when it is out of control. It is a tragedy when a house is on fire. You hear a siren in the night, and you know that a group of men is rushing to put out a fire. Even in our present civilization we are not able to control fires. The London fire of 1666 destroyed London. Mrs. O’Leary’s cow kicked over a lantern in Chicago in 1871 and started that great and historic fire. And still today we see great devastations caused by fire.

The tongue is like a fire; when it is under control, it is a blessing; when it is out of control, it is devastating. It can be a cure, or it can be a curse. In Proverbs 12:18 we read, “There is that speaketh like the piercings of a sword: but the tongue of the wise is health.” The tongue can be like a sword that kills, but it also can be health itself. What a picture this is of the tongue! Again in Proverbs we read, “The heart of him that hath understanding seeketh knowledge: but the mouth of fools feedeth on foolishness” (Prov. 15:14).

Let me repeat the proverb I quoted a little earlier: “Thou art master of the unspoken word, but the spoken word is master of you.” If you haven’t said it, you cannot be held responsible, but once you’ve said it, it can condemn you. I have learned through personal experience that a slip of the tongue (especially if it’s made on a radio broadcast which is heard by many) can have great repercussions. You remember that Simon Peter’s tongue betrayed him, and he denied that he knew his Lord. But on the Day of Pentecost, what was it that the Lord used? It was the tongue of that blundering, stumbling, bumbling fellow, Simon Peter. The tongue can be either a curse or a cure.

Brush and forest fires scorch and blacken and are a plague. Like a fire, the tongue can burn through a church, burn through a community, burn through a town, and even burn through a nation.²⁰

²⁰ McGee, J. V. (1997). *Thru the Bible commentary* (electronic ed.) (Jas 3:6). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

ESV: boasts of great things. Pride (cf. “bitter jealousy,” “boast,” v. 14) is a major cause of the misuse of the tongue. In a progressive series framed by the imagery of fire, the tongue is presented in all its terrible potential. The small fire is the proud “boast” or other careless use of the tongue, and the great forest fire is the resulting conflagration, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue represents and puts into expression all the wickedness of the world. The entire course of life (lit., “the cycle of existence”) likely means the “ups and downs” of life. The tongue turns upside down every aspect of life in the community as well as in the individual. set on fire by hell. Evil speech destroys because it comes from Satan himself.

What is it that starts the largest of wildfires? Usually, it is a single, small spark. That spark ignites a small amount of dry tinder that, in turn, ignites larger twigs, branches, bushes, trees, and large structures. When such a wildfire starts, the only appropriate action for man or beast is to flee. As you would dread the devastation of such fire and flames, you should dread the consequences of contentions, revilings, slanders, lies, and every thing that would kindle the fire of anger in your own spirit or in the spirit of others. What causes the tongue to be so inflammable? For many of us, the tongue seems to be tied to our personal will and emotions, and we tend to use it without thinking of the consequences of our words. It is easily driven by our basic nature, a nature of sin, and just as the rest of our person must come under the Lordship of Christ, so should our tongue. Somehow, many Christians fail to understand this, and though they profess faith in Christ, they use their tongue to promote their own self-will, and like a raging fire, destroy the very relationships that God is desiring that they develop. Only Satan wins when our basic sin nature is empowered by our tongue.

The consequences of our words is rapid. They can elicit a prompt response before the talker considers those consequences. Words cannot be taken back. Like toothpaste from a tube, once let out, it is out. Trust can be destroyed with a single word, and once trust is lost, it can only be regained by repentance, forgiveness, and a period of integrity. Simply stated words can be devastating to another person. People's lives have been radically altered by the words of others. Words shouted in anger have broken relationships and resulted in fights and death. What would be your response if your Bible study teacher suddenly started speaking out of character with words of slander, obscenities, lies and rage? At the very least you would be witnessing a loss of control, and at worst, you may be witnessing the true nature of a hypocrite. Certainly, the integrity of the teaching from such an individual would be called into question.²¹

James 3:7

For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind:

Clarke: Every kind of beasts—That is, every species of wild beasts, is tamed, i.e. brought under man's power and dominion. Beasts, birds, serpents, and some kinds of fishes have been tamed so as to be domesticated.

²¹ http://www.biblicaltheology.com/jam/59_00_00.html

Chuck Smith: It is interesting how that man has been able to tame all kinds of creatures. We can tame lions, we've seen the lion tamers and we've watched them in the circus. Birds can be trained to talk, and to say phrases. Even serpents can be trained and you see the... in India the guy with his flute and the Boa constrictor you know doing its thing. And of course you can go down to Sea World or over to Marineland and see how they have trained the fish. Man has learned how to train and to bring into control all these of these wild things in nature. One thing man hasn't been able to tame is his own tongue,

James 3:8

But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

No man can tame his own heart. Then, How do you cleanse your heart?
See Isaiah 6:5-7.

Missler: The most deadly poison is one that is tasteless and odorless: subtle criticism and slander; verbal venom which has done its work while the victim cannot react. It can include a word *unsaid*; the awkward silence; the raised eyebrows; the quizzical look—all sent from the counsels of Satan.

It can break hearts and ruin reputations.

For every word in Adolf Hitler's book, *Mein Kampf*, 125 lives were lost in World War II. Contrast the words of Hitler and the words of Winston Churchill, whose brilliantly measured utterances pulled a faltering nation together for its "finest hour."

The tongue is like an unruly animal, restless, and dangerous. It seeks a prey and then pounces and kills.

Some animals are poisonous, as are some tongues. The deceptive things about poison is that it can work slowly, invisibly. A malicious word can spread, uncontested, and do a great damage to a person, a family, or an entire church.

Animals can be tamed; a fire can be controlled; only God can tame a tongue.

[But the tongue can no man tame] All species of beasts have been tamed by man, but the tongue cannot be tamed by any cunning, persuasion, or influence of man. Salvation alone can help a man control the tongue (2 Cor. 5:17-18).

[tongue can no man tame] Dake: Twelve Things About the Tongue

1. A little member (James 3:5)
2. Boasts great things (James 3:5)
3. Is a fire (James 3:6)
4. A world of iniquity (James 3:6)
5. It defiles the whole body (James 3:6)
6. Sets on fire the course of nature (James 3:6)
7. It is untameable (James 3:7-8)
8. An unruly evil (James 3:8)
9. Full of deadly poison (James 3:8)
10. Used to bless God and curse men (James 3:9)

11. Capable of good conversation (James 3:13)
12. Capable of bitter strife (James 3:14)

[poison] Dake: Fifteen Kinds of Tongues

1. Viper's tongues (Job 20:16)
2. Flattering tongue (Psalm 5:9)
3. Proud tongue (Psalm 12:3)
4. Lying tongue (Psalm 109:2; Proverbs 6:17)
5. Deceitful tongue (Psalm 120:2)
6. False tongue (Psalm 120:3)
7. Froward tongue (Proverbs 10:31)
8. Wholesome tongue (Proverbs 10:31)
9. Healthy tongue (Proverbs 12:18)
10. Naughty tongue (Proverbs 17:4)
11. Perverse tongue (Proverbs 17:20)
12. Soft tongue (Proverbs 25:15)
13. Stammering tongue (Isaiah 28:11; Isaiah 33:19)
14. Backbiting tongue (Proverbs 25:23)
15. Poison tongue (James 3:8)

Clarke: But the tongue wan no man tame—No cunning, persuasion, or influence has ever been able to silence it. Nothing but the grace of God, excision, or death, can bring it under subjection.

It is an unruly evil— An evil that cannot be restrained; it cannot be brought under any kind of government; it breaks all bounds.

Clarke: Full of deadly poison—He refers here to the tongues of serpents, supposed to be the means of conveying their poison into wounds made by their teeth. Throughout the whole of this poetic and highly declamatory description, St. James must have the tongue of the slanderer, calumniator, backbiter, whisperer, and tale-bearer, particularly in view. Vipers, basilisks; and rattlesnakes are not more dangerous to life, than these are to the peace and reputation of men.

Barnes: But the tongue can no man tame. This does not mean that it is never brought under control, but that it is impossible effectually and certainly to subdue it. It would be possible to subdue and domesticate any kind of beasts, but this could not be done with the tongue,

LAN: If no human being can control the tongue, why bother trying? Even if we may not achieve perfect control of our tongues, we can still learn enough control to reduce the damage our words can do. It is better to fight a fire than to go around setting new ones! Remember that we are not fighting the tongue's fire in our own strength. The Holy Spirit will give us increasing power to monitor and control what we say, so that when we are offended, the Spirit will remind us of God's love, and we won't react in a hateful manner. When we are criticized, the Spirit will heal the hurt, and we won't lash out.

McGee: May I say to you, you can tame a lion; you can tame an elephant, but you cannot tame the little tongue. As someone has said, “The most untamable thing in the world has its den just behind the teeth.” That’s one little animal which no zoo has in captivity, no circus can make it perform, no man can tame it. Only a regenerate tongue in a redeemed body, a tongue that God has tamed, can be used for Him.

It is interesting to note that Paul said, “That if thou shalt *confess with thy mouth* the Lord Jesus, and shalt *believe in thine heart* that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved” (Rom. 10:9, italics mine). In other words, we are to sing a duet, the tongue and the heart are to be in tune. The Lord Jesus said, “. . . for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh” (Matt. 12:34)—what is in the heart will come out. Someone has said, “What is in the well of the heart will come out through the bucket of the mouth.” If it is in your heart, you are going to say it sooner or later. It is interesting that when our Lord came to that dumb man, the gospel writer is very careful to say, “He touched his mouth!” My friend, if He has touched you, He has touched your mouth also.²²

JNTC: The tongue ... is an ... evil thing. *Lashon hara* (literally, “tongue of the evil”) in Judaism refers to gossip, backbiting, rumormongering, slander and other misuses of speech. The Talmud condemns it severely:

“If one speaks *lashon hara* it is as though he denied God The sin of *lashon hara* is weighed equally with the sins of idolatry, sexual immorality and murder.” (Arakhin 15b)

The three sins named are those for which, according to the Talmud (Sanhedrin 74a, quoted in Ac 15:20a), a Jew is supposed to give up his life rather than commit. Zelig Pliskin (a non-Messianic Jew) has written an interesting book on the laws of *lashon hara* called *Guard Your Tongue*, based on the writings of Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan, known as the *Chafetz Chaim* (“desirer of life,” from Psalm 34:13–14(12–13), “Which of you is a desirer of life, and wants long life to enjoy what is good? Then keep your tongue [*lashon*] from evil [*ra*], and your lips from uttering lies.” The *Chafetz Chaim* died in 1934 at the age of 95.) He points out that even true statements may be *lashon hara* if relating them can cause damage. A sample of his amusing yet practical advice:

“Beware of *loshon hora* when speaking on the telephone. If the person with whom you are conversing insists on relating *loshon hora*, you should rebuke him. If this is not possible, find an excuse to hang up—‘Excuse me, something has just come up’ (the *loshon hora*)—and discontinue the conversation.” (pp. 31–32)

Out of the heart proceed all kinds of evils (Mk 7:20–23), and the first place they go is to the tongue (v. 6).

Full of death-dealing poison. Compare Psalm 140:4(3), quoted at Ro 3:13.²³

²² McGee, J. V. (1997). *Thru the Bible commentary* (electronic ed.) (Jas 3:8). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

²³ Stern, D. H. (1996). *Jewish New Testament Commentary : A companion volume to the Jewish New Testament* (electronic ed.) (Jas 3:8). Clarksville: Jewish New Testament Publications.

Chuck Smith: Jesus, one day, said something that is worth considering at this point. He said, "It's not really that which goes into a man that defiles a man, but that which comes out of a man that defiles him. For out of the mouth comes blasphemies and evil speaking." And then He said it is "out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks" (Matthew 15:11, 18-19). That doesn't speak too good for our hearts does it? The mouth is the voice piece of the heart of man. The man reveals what's inside of him by his tongue. And sometimes that frightens me.

Spurgeon: God alone can subdue it, and teach it to be silent, or to speak to his glory. This lion cannot be bound even by a Samson, but the Lord can transform it to a lamb.

Imagine, like Daniel in the lion's den, you are in a closed room, surrounded by dangerous animals such as lions, tigers, and bears (oh, my!). What would be on your mind? One would probably be looking for some place to hide. These animals can all be tamed through several different means, both physiological and psychological. However, no such taming of the tongue is as successful. We can tame the dumbest of animals, but cannot tame the most intelligent of animal expressions. Here James teaches how difficult it is to control the tongue. During the history of mankind he has brought every type of wild animal under his dominion. Though the tamed animals may be caged, the tongue is always liable to slip out of the bars and devour with a venomous bite. So, not only does it need to be watched and guarded and controlled, but much more care and pain will be needed to prevent outbursts. The deadly poison of verse 8 is reminiscent of the venomous viper in the grass that quickly strikes.²⁴

James 3:9

Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God.

[**similitude**] Greek: *homoiosis* (GSN-3669), making like; image. Only here, but in the Septuagint in Genesis 1:26; Ezekiel 1:10; Daniel 10:16; etc. This refers to outward or physical image.

Clarke: Therewith bless we God—The tongue is capable of rehearsing the praises, and setting forth the glories, of the eternal King: what a pity that it should ever be employed in a contrary work! It can proclaim and vindicate the truth of God, and publish the Gospel of peace and good will among men: what a pity that it should ever be employed in falsehoods, calumny, or in the cause of infidelity!

Clarke: And therewith curse we men—In the true Satanic spirit, many pray to God, the Father, to destroy those who are objects of their displeasure! These are the common swearers, whose mouths are generally full of direful imprecations against those with whom they are offended. The consideration that man is made after the image of God should restrain the tongue of the swearer; but there are many who, while they pretend to

²⁴ http://www.biblicaltheology.com/jam/59_00_00.html

sing the high praises of God, are ready to wish the direst imprecations either on those who offend them, or with whom they choose to be offended.

Barnes: Which are made after the similitude of God. After his image, Genesis 1:26-27. As we bless God, we ought with the same organ to bless those who are like him. There is an absurdity in cursing men who are thus made, like what there would be in both blessing and cursing the Creator himself.

Humanity, Image of God—People have been created in God’s image and represent God on earth. Even as sinners, we continue to bear God’s image and His name (Christians). To curse a human being is to curse God’s image and deserve punishment.

Bless our God may refer to the Jewish practice of saying “blessed be He” whenever God’s name was mentioned. James is pointing out the inconsistency of blessing God while cursing people who are created in His image. **similitude of God:** God created human beings, both man and woman, in His own image (see Gen. 1:26). Today, people still reflect God’s image, though badly marred by sin (see Gen. 9:6).²⁵

ESV: It is both hypocrisy and folly to **bless** God during a worship service and then, after the service, to **curse** someone made in God’s image (see Gen. 1:26–27). If the “curse” implies the common practice of invoking the name of God against the person, then this is doubly heinous.

James 3:10

Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be.

Clarke: Out of the same mouth—This saying is something like that, Proverbs 18:21: Death and life are in the power of the tongue; and on this, for an illustration of St. James’ words, hear Vayikra Rabba, sec. 33: “Rabbi Simeon, the son of Gamaliel, said to his servant Tobias, Go and bring me some good food from the market: the servant went, and he bought tongues. At another time he said to the same servant, Go and buy me some bad food: the servant went, and bought tongues. The master said, What is the reason that when I ordered thee to buy me good and bad food, thou didst bring tongues? The servant answered, From the tongue both good and evil come to man: if it be good, there is nothing better; if bad, there is nothing worse.”

A saying very like that of St. James as found in Rabbi Tanchum, fol. 10, 4: “The mouth desires to study in the law, and to speak good words; to praise God, to glorify him, and to celebrate him with hymns: but it can also slander, blaspheme, reproach, and swear falsely.” See Schoettgen.

To find a man who officiates in sacred things to be a common swearer, a slanderer, etc., is truly monstrous; but there have been many cases of this kind, and I have known several. Let me say to all such, My brethren, these things ought not so to be.

²⁵ The Nelson Study Bible

McGee: The tongues which you and I have are capable of praising God or blaspheming God. As we have said before, the tongue is that which lifts man above the animal world. Man is not a gibbering ape or a mockingbird. Man can communicate with man, and he can communicate with God. When a man can sing like an angel on Sunday and then talk like a demon during the week—you label him as you want to—the Bible calls that man a hypocrite.

When I announced in the bank where I worked as a young man that I was going to study for the ministry, one of the vice-presidents of the bank called me into his office. He had been a good friend of mine, and he knew something of my life and how I had lived. He said to me, “Vernon, I hope you are going to be a genuine preacher and a genuine servant of God.” He said, “The reason I am not a Christian today is because of an experience had during the war.” (He was referring to World War I.) He went on to tell me how the bank had set up a branch bank at the powder plant at Old Hickory outside of Nashville, Tennessee. One of the tellers there was also a soloist in a church in downtown Nashville. One Sunday as that teller came out of church, the bank vice-president overheard one of the ladies say, “You know, that man is one of the most wonderful men in the world. He sings just like an angel!” This vice-president made no comment at the time. But that woman owned property, and she had business at the bank out at Old Hickory. She came in one day and was talking to him when suddenly they heard the vilest language imaginable. It came from the teller who had attempted to balance and he hadn’t balanced. (I was a teller for several years, and I know that this is one of the most discouraging things that can happen.) Well, when this man didn’t balance, he began to explode with blasphemies, and the lady said, “Who in the world is that?” The bank vice-president said, “That’s your soloist who sings like an angel on Sunday!” A man can bless God with his mouth, and he can blaspheme God. You can do both with the mouth you have. The Lord Jesus said that what is in the heart will come up through the mouth; you can be sure your tongue is going to say it.²⁶

Spurgeon: Inconsistent language is monstrous. Our speech should be all of a piece, and altogether holiness unto the Lord. Is it so?

Not all that the tongue produces is necessarily bad. James is referring in these verses to the unruly tongue, a tongue that is not brought under the control of the Lord Jesus. What are some of the proper uses of our most prevalent means of communication? Sharing prayers and needs, edifying, teaching, preaching, counseling, singing. This verse also speaks of the consequences of hurting others. When we despise and hurt others we are despising God who made them. We are directly sinning against God. If we find it so easy to condemn and criticize others, what does this say about our relationship with God? Such behavior is not appropriate for a Christian who professes Jesus as Lord. It is absurd that a tongue that praises God in one breath curses God or man in the second. James is referring to the inconsistency of a tongue that is not brought under the power of the Holy Spirit. If such an inconsistency exists in oneself, he should examine the source of his faith. Note that the scripture reveals that it is God’s privilege to condemn, not

²⁶ McGee, J. V. (1997). *Thru the Bible commentary* (electronic ed.) (Jas 3:10). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

ours. When we see reason to accuse and condemn others, we should always note if it is truly our responsibility to do so. Consider the archangel Michael when contending with the Devil.

Jude 1-9. Yet Michael the archangel, when contending with the devil he disputed about the body of Moses, durst not bring against him a railing accusation, but said, The Lord rebuke thee.

Michael would not even lose his temper against Satan. Why should such an inconsistency not be? Like our works led of the Spirit, our speech should also be led of the Spirit, and His works are always consistently administered in love. Why is the tongue so much more inconsistent than our works? We have time to consider our works as we choose to serve one another. Often the time it take between thought and word is immeasurably small. I once complimented a friend stating, "I really respect the fact that you never answer a question without pausing to think." His answer was (after a long delay), "Jack, you don't understand, it simply takes me that long to think of an answer." What he stated was humble, and true. It takes him time because he thinks about the question before blurting out his own thoughts, as I would normally do myself. There seems to be little lead time in what we say, particularly when the content of our speech is emotionally charged. James calls for integrity and consistency in our speech as well as in other areas of our lives.²⁷

James 3:11

Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?

Missler: In most of the world—even small villages—a freshwater fountain in the center of town symbolizes blessing.

Man needs water for drinking, washing, cooking, farming, any other activities necessary for life.

Prov 18:4 - *"The words of a man's mouth are as deep waters, and the wellspring of wisdom as a flowing brook."*

Prov 10:11 - *"The mouth of a righteous man is a well of life."*

Prov 13:14 - *"The law of the wise is a fountain of life, to depart from the snares of death."*

Water is life-giving; so our words can give life. If they are controlled by the Spirit of God, and not our flesh.

Prov 18:21 - *"Death and life are in the power of the tongue."*

Our recent floods in the Midwest demonstrate what *uncontrolled* water can do.

Water is essential for life. So is the refreshment of the Spirit through His words. Paul's prayer was that he might "refresh" the saints in Rome when he came to them (Rom 15:32). He often named Christians who had refreshed him (1 Cor 16:18; Philemon 7, 20).

Water also cleanses. There was a laver in the Tabernacle and Temple.

God's Word is the spiritual water that cleanses us (John 15:3; Eph 5:26-27).

Our words to others can also help to cleanse and sanctify them. Our words ought to be like the river in Ezekiel 47 that brought life to everything it touched.

²⁷ http://www.biblicaltheology.com/jam/59_00_00.html

Prov 12:18 - “*There is that speaketh like the piercings of a sword: but the tongue of the wise is health.*”

These are questions 12-15 in the Book of James. The next question is in James 4:1. Nothing has been found in nature that can compare to the double use of the tongue—to the blessing and cursing out of the same mouth.²⁸

Four Comparisons (James 3:11-12): (Dake)

1. A fountain cannot produce sweet and bitter water at the same time
2. A fig tree cannot produce olives
3. A vine cannot produce figs
4. The ocean cannot produce sweet water

Clarke: Doth a fountain send forth—sweet water and bitter?—In many things nature is a sure guide to man; but no such inconsistency is found in the natural world as this blessing and cursing in man. No fountain, at the same opening, sends forth sweet water and bitter; no fig tree can bear olive berries; no vine can bear figs; nor can the sea produce salt water and fresh from the same place. These are all contradictions, and indeed impossibilities, in nature. And it is depraved man alone that can act the monstrous part already referred to.

Barnes: Doth a fountain send forth at the same place. Marg., *hole*. The greek word means *opening, fissure*, such as there is in the earth, or in rocks from which a fountain gushes.

Sweet water and bitter. Fresh water and salt, James 3:12. Such things do not occur in the works of nature, and they should not be found in man.

James 3:12

Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so *can* no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.

Missler: The tongue can be also delightful, as a tree. They provide beauty, shade, and bear fruit. Our words can help shelter and encourage.

Prov 10:21 - “*The lips of the righteous feed many.*” Jesus said, “*These words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.*” (John 6:63).

The most important thing about a tree is the root system. They need it to be healthy and deep. We need to be like the “blessed man” in Psalm 1.

- 1] Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.
- 2] But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.
- 3] *And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth*

²⁸ Dake Study Notes, Dake’s Study Bible

his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.

Nourishment is important. Our Lord communed with His Father and heard from Heaven each day.

Isa 50:4 - "*The Lord hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary: he wakeneth morning by morning, he wakeneth mine ear to hear as the learned.*"

Mark 1:35 - "*And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed.*"

If we are to have tongues of delight, we need to meet with Him every morning.

James issued a **warning**: A fountain cannot bring forth two kinds of water; a tree cannot yield two kinds of fruit.

What is your most important **stewardship**?

Your heart.

Matt 15:18 - *But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man.*

Prov4:23 - *Keep thy heart with all diligence.*

Twelve Words that can transform your life:

Please

Thank You

I'm Sorry

I love you

I'm praying for you.

Give God your heart—and your tongue—and be His blessing to others.

There may be a different translation here and the true reading appears to be, Neither can salt water produce sweet, or, Neither can the sea produce fresh water; and this is a new comparison, and not an inference from that in James 3:11. This reading Griesbach has admitted into the text; and of it Professor White, in his *Crisews*, says, "a reading undoubtedly genuine." There are therefore, four distinct comparisons here:

1. A fountain cannot produce sweet water and bitter.
2. A fig tree cannot produce olive berries.
3. A vine cannot produce figs.
4. Salt water cannot be made sweet. That is, according to the ordinary operations of nature, these things are impossible. Chemical analysis is out of the question.

Barnes: Can the fig-tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? Such a thing is *impossible* in nature, and equally *absurd* in morals. A fig-tree bears only figs; and so the tongue ought to give utterance only to one class of sentiments and emotions. These illustrations are very striking, and show the absurdity of that which the apostle represses. At the same time, they accomplish the main purpose which he had in view, to repress the desire of becoming public teachers without suitable qualifications. They show the power of the tongue; they show what a dangerous power it is for a man to wield who has not the proper qualifications; they show that no one should put himself in the position where he may wield this power without such a degree of tried prudence, wisdom, discretion, and piety, that there shall be a moral certainty that he will use it aright.

LAN: Our contradictory speech often puzzles us. At times our words are right and pleasing to God, but at other times they are violent and destructive. Which of these speech patterns reflects our true identity? The tongue gives us a picture of our basic human nature. We were made in God's image, but we have also fallen into sin. God works to change us from the inside out. When the Holy Spirit purifies a heart, he gives self-control so that the person will speak words that please God.

Christian Ethics, Language—Words need to please God, not impress other people. We can ruin our reputations and our contribution to other people with a few ill-chosen words. Satan delights in controlling our tongue. Then he does not have to control anything else. We have no power over the tongue unless we submit it totally to God. Partial control of the tongue will not do. Nothing should escape our mouths that is not praise to God in some way.

Pouring salt water into fresh produces salt water; and mixing bad fruit with good fruit produces a bushel of rotten fruit. Likewise, mixing the contradictory speech of **blessing** and **cursing** will only produce negative results.

McGee: In other words, a man can be a two-faced, double-minded, and forked-tongued individual—he can say both good and bad. But no fountain down here on this earth is going to give forth both sweet and bitter water, nor will a tree bear both figs and olives.

Now the tongue reveals genuine faith, because it is with the mouth that confession is made of that which is in the heart—²⁹

Chuck Smith: And so there is a paradox in our tongue it's different from anything else. From the same mouth, there can come glorious praises unto God and horrible curses unto men. The tongue, God help us that we might be so yielded to the Spirit that He would do for us what we can't do for ourselves and that is bring our tongue under control.

I've said so many things that I wish I had not of said; said in a moment of anger. How I wished I could have taken them back. And there are a lot of things that I wish I had said that I didn't a word of encouragement, a word of forgiveness, a word of comfort. You know we sometimes just don't want to give that person that consolation of saying, "Well that's all right, I understand." If I only had said it though, I could have saved them so much mental anguish and turmoil. I could have let them know that it really didn't matter.

ESV: In three illustrations of ridiculous natural contrasts, James drives home the point that blessing God while cursing his people cannot be countenanced. spring. Springs were the key to survival in dry Palestine, and the placement of villages and towns tended to depend on their presence. olives . . . figs. Just as no tree would produce two kinds of fruit, so also a true believer would not produce both blessings of God and curses toward others.

James refers to fruit generated in nature. A true and living faith will not allow such inconsistencies in word or action. How many hurts and sins would be prevented if we

²⁹ McGee, J. V. (1997). *Thru the Bible commentary* (electronic ed.) (Jas 3:12). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

were able to make all of our words and actions consistent with the Spirit that God has given us. How can we make our words and our spirit be more consistent with God's word and His spirit?

Col. 3:8-11. *But now ye also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth. Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him.*

What should we do when we experience emotions of anger to avoid speaking malice, slander, or filthy language? What should we do when we experience prejudicial feelings of superiority over other races, creeds, religions, etc? The scripture calls upon us to look to the Spirit who has given you a new self. That new self is not led of Satan to confuse and destroy, but rather led of the Spirit to reconcile and build up.

1 Peter 3:8-11. *Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous: Not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing; knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing. For he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile. Let him eschew evil, and do good; let him seek peace, and ensue it.*

In the previous chapters we have noted how James equates the works of the Spirit and the nature of true faith. Works of the Spirit are the fruit of faith, and like a fig tree that produces figs, true faith will produce the true fruit of love that is empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Christian who truly loves God has no choice but to bear fruit as his nature changes from a self-centered focus to one that is seeking obedience to the Lord. Obedience to the Lord is then demonstrated by that true fruit in both what we do and in what we say. Consequently, if one professes to be a true believer but fails to produce fruit that is consistent with the love of God, that person's testimony of true faith comes into question.

Let each of us look into our own hearts and examine the way we use our tongue, particularly as we use it to communicate with the body of Christ. If we see a pattern of behavior that is motivated by our own self-will rather than that of the Holy Spirit, we have an opportunity to confess that sin to God, to repent, and to seek His forgiveness as we seek to make our lives a testimony to Him rather than to ourselves, and in so doing we can be a productive agent for God's kingdom on this earth.³⁰

James 3:13

Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him show out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom.

Missler: Prov 4:7 - "Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding."

³⁰ http://www.biblicaltheology.com/jam/59_00_00.html

Examples of the folly of man's wisdom:

The Tower of Babel

failure and confusion (Gen 11:1-9);

Abraham's fleeing to Egypt (from famine)

(Gen 12:10-20);

Saul's offer of his armor to David

(1 Sam 17:38ff);

Roman experts setting out to sea despite Paul's warning

(Acts 27).

Origin of man's wisdom: Jam 3:15 - earthy, sensual, devilish.

Three enemies: the world, the flesh, the devil (Eph 2:1-3).

Don't confuse the world's *knowledge* with the world's *wisdom*. Over a century ago, Henry David Thoreau warned that we had "Improved means to unimproved ends." The world by its wisdom knew not God, and its wisdom rejects the very Gospel of God, 1 Cor 1:18-20.

God's wisdom is foolishness to man, 1 Cor 2:14.

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the holy is understanding." Prov 9:10. (Ps 111:10; Job 28:28; Prov 1:7; 15:33).

"There is no fear of God before their eyes," Rom 3:18

[It is disturbing to discover—even among Christians in positions of responsibility—how few conduct themselves with true reverence for Him in honest and forthright dealings.]

How and Where Do We Get our Wisdom?

1] Our wisdom is of Christ: 1 Cor 1:24, 30. Col 2:3. Our first step is receiving Him. Paul speaks of being "in Christ" 161 times.

2] The Word of God is our wisdom: Deut 6:4.5-6. 2 Tim 3:15. Psalm 119:97-100.

3] Also, from believing prayer: James 1:5.

Fear of the Lord comes from one's devotional life...

[**wise man**] One who can bridle his own tongue and is qualified to teach others.

[**conversation**] Greek: *anastrophe* (GSN-391), conduct; behavior. See part 2, Six Things in Which to Be an Example.

Six Things in Which to Be an Example

1. In word—teach sound doctrine; nothing but the Word of God that saves the soul (Romans 1:16; Romans 10:17; 2 Tim. 3:16; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23).
2. In conversation. Greek: *anastrophe* (GSN-391), the whole conduct of life in domestic and public relations; behavior. Always translated "conversation" (1 Tim. 4:12; Galatians 1:13; Ephes. 4:22; Hebrews 13:7; James 3:13; 1 Peter 1:15,18; 1 Peter 2:12; 1 Peter 3:1,2,16; 2 Peter 2:7; 2 Peter 3:11; cp. *anastrepho* (GSN-390), note, *2 Cor. 1:12).
3. In charity. Greek: *agape* (GSN-26), love (see note, *1 Cor. 13:4).
4. In Spirit. If this refers to the Holy Spirit it means in the use of spiritual gifts and in yieldedness to the Spirit in all of life and conduct (1 Cor. 12; Galatians 5:22-23). If it

refers to the human spirit it means the manner and disposition in which all things are done.

5. In faith. Greek: *pistis* (GSN-4103), often used in the sense of faithfulness (see note, 2 Thes. 3:2; see Faith).
6. In purity. Greek: *hagneia* (GSN-47). Here and 1 Tim. 5:2.

[with meekness of wisdom] True wisdom is always accompanied with meekness and gentleness. Scholars are sometimes proud, overbearing, and disdainful. Such men have education, but not true wisdom.

Clarke: Who is a wise man—One truly religious; who, although he can neither bridle nor tame other men's tongues, can restrain his own.

And endued with knowledge— And qualified to teach others.

Clarke: Let him show—Let him by a holy life and chaste conversation show, through meekness and gentleness, joined to his Divine information, that he is a Christian indeed; his works and his spirit proving that God is in him of a truth; and that, from the fullness of a holy heart, his feet walk, his hands work; and his tongue speaks. We may learn from this that genuine wisdom is ever accompanied with meekness and gentleness. Those proud, overbearing, and disdainful men, who pass for great scholars and eminent critics, may have learning, but they have not wisdom. Their learning implies their correct knowledge of the structure of language, and of composition in general; but wisdom they have none, nor any self-government. They are like the blind man who carried a lantern in daylight to keep others from jostling him in the street. That learning is not only little worth, but despicable, that does not teach a man to govern his own spirit, and to be humble in his conduct towards others.

Barnes: With meekness of wisdom. With a wise and prudent gentleness of life; not in a noisy, arrogant, and boastful manner. True wisdom is always meek, mild, gentle; and that is the wisdom which is needful, if men would become public teachers. It is remarkable that the truly wise man is always characterized by a calm spirit, a mild and placid demeanour, and by a gentle, though firm, enunciation of his sentiments. A noisy, boisterous, and stormy declaimer we never select as a safe counsellor. He may accomplish much in his way by his bold eloquence of manner, but we do not put him in places where we need far-reaching thought, or where we expect the exercise of profound philosophical views. In an eminent degree, the ministry of the gospel should be characterized by a calm, gentle, and thoughtful wisdom—a wisdom which shines in all the actions of the life.

Sin, Hypocrisy—Words control our relationships with people. All of us use words unwisely and hurt others. We are not perfect. We are sinners. We cannot extinguish the fires of hatred, doubt, jealousy, and anger our tongues start. We must be careful to control our words so they do not discredit our Christian confession before the world. To use the tongue to praise God and to spread evil is vile hypocrisy, pretense to be what we are not. Once a word is spoken and heard, it cannot be retrieved; its effect will irresistibly run its

often destructive course. James singled out teachers because of their potential to influence a number of people. Because impulses take the shape of words, control of the tongue is an indication of a disciplined life.³¹

The tongue can reveal genuine faith. It can give a testimony for God. It can speak wisdom.

ESV: wise and understanding . . . conduct. Wisdom for James is not merely intellectual but also behavioral. meekness of wisdom. Meekness (Gk. *prautēs*, translated “gentleness” in Gal. 5:23) was considered weakness by the Greeks, but Jesus elevated it to a primary Christian virtue (Matt. 5:5; 11:29). Meekness comes not from cowardice or passivity but rather from trusting God and therefore being set free from anxious self-promotion.

Spurgeon: Holiness, meekness, and gentleness in conversation are the best signs of a really instructed mind. God alone by his Holy Spirit can give us this wisdom.

True wisdom will be known by its works. Two examples of a lifestyle that shows wisdom and understanding included here are,

- A lifestyle of righteousness and uncompromising good.
- a lifestyle that is active in works of and for the Lord, done out of love for God and others instead of for attention or self gratification.
- What is humility? Recognizing and responding to your true place in God's plan.
- What is meekness? Strength and power under wise control.
- What is wisdom? The Godly application of knowledge.

A truly wise person is a knowing person. He will not accept the reputation of being wise without putting great emphasis on knowledge to facilitate understanding.

Note, though this passage follows the dissertation on the tongue, this verse refers to the lifestyle, or conversation (old English)³²

James 3:14

But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth.

Missler: What are the evidences of *false wisdom*?

Envy: Ambition and boasting attempts to rob God of His glory. Mt 6:1-18. 1 Cor 1:17ff; 29, 31. Is our zeal for the Lord or carnal? Do we rejoice when other succeed, or are we filled with envy and criticism? When others fail, are we burdened or glad?

Strife: Self-seeking. Rivalry. Phil 2:3.

Boasting: Pride. (Paul boasted of his ministry—but gave the glory to God.)

Deceit: The biggest deceit—believing your own press releases...

³¹ Disciple's Study Bible

³² http://www.biblicaltheology.com/jam/59_00_00.html

vs. Meekness: Power under control. Meekness is the right use of power; wisdom is the right use of knowledge. Seeks only the glory of God; doesn't cater to the praises of men.

[But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts] If you have this condition of heart, you don't have true wisdom. Even if you defend religion, you are false in your profession and lie against the truth.

Barnes: Glory not. Do not boast, in such a case, of your qualifications to be public teachers. Nothing would render you more unfit for such an office than such a spirit.

[bitter envying and strife in your hearts] (Dake) Eight characteristics of false wisdom:

1. Bitter envying (James 3:14,16). Greek: *zelos* (GSN-2205) (See pt. 9, Seventeen Works of the Flesh)
2. Strife in the heart (James 3:14,16)
3. Glory in profession (James 3:14)
4. Earthly, having this life only in view (James 3:15)
5. Sensual, living only to satisfy the animal appetites (James 3:15)
6. Devilish, inspired by demons (James 3:15)
7. Confusion (James 3:16)
8. Every evil work (James 3:16)

Barnes: And lie not against the truth. You would lie against what is true by setting up a claim to the requisite qualifications for such an office, if this is your spirit. Men should seek no office or station which they could not properly seek if the whole truth about them were known.

LAN: "Bitter envy and selfish ambition" are inspired by the devil. It is easy for us to be drawn into wrong desires by the pressures of society and sometimes even by well-meaning Christians. By listening to the advice: "Assert yourself," "Go for it," "Set high goals," we can be drawn into greed and destructive competitiveness. Seeking God's wisdom delivers us from the need to compare ourselves to others and to want what they have.

McGee: Strife and bitterness are certainly not the fruits of faith, but the tongue can stir up that kind of thing. James is making a contrast between the tongue of the foolish believer and the tongue of the wise believer. In fact, an uncontrolled tongue raises the question in the minds of others whether a man is a child of God or not. You cannot make me believe that a genuine believer can curse six days a week and then sing in a choir on Sunday. He cannot tell dirty jokes and then teach a Sunday school class, telling about the love of Jesus. That tongue which you have can do either one, but if it does both, it is that which stirs up strife. We are told here, "Lie not against the truth." A lying tongue is one that denies the Lord during the week by its conversation.³³

³³ McGee, J. V. (1997). *Thru the Bible commentary* (electronic ed.) (Jas 3:14). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

ESV: Bitter jealousy and selfish ambition are the antithesis of true wisdom as characterized by “meekness” (v. 13). They are also far different from the righteous character of a “jealous God” (Ex. 20:5; 34:14; Deut. 4:24; see James 4:5), who appropriately yearns for his own honor and the loyal devotion of his people, while the envious yearn for what does not belong to them. “Selfish ambition” is a divisive willingness to split the group in order to achieve personal power and prestige (it is translated “rivalry” in Gal. 5:20; Phil. 1:17; 2:3).

A lack of wisdom is exposed when harbored envy and selfish ambition is demonstrated in words and action. Such a spirit is a contradiction to the love which is otherwise professed, thus denying the truth.

Envy and strife are opposed to meekness and wisdom. They are mutually exclusive. "Holy zeal and bitter envying are as different as the flames of seraphim and the fire of hell."³⁴

James 3:15

This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish.

Missler: False wisdom’s source: “sensual,” natural.

psuchikos {psoo-khee-kos’} natural 4, sensual 2; from *psuke* (life, soul), from which we get our word “psychology.” (!)

1 Cor 2:14 and 15:44, 46: “natural”; opposite of spiritual. Jude 19, “sensual.”

Its origin is apart from, and opposed to, the new nature given by God. It is “wisdom from beneath” - devilish, demonic.

Satan’s wisdom: Genesis 3. Thus, Rom 1:18-25.

Barnes: **This wisdom descendeth not from above.** 1 Corinthians 3:3. The *wisdom* here referred to is that carnal or worldly wisdom which produces strife and contention; that kind of knowledge which leads to self-conceit, and which prompts a man to defend his opinions with overheated zeal. In the contentions which are in the world, in church and state, in neighbourhoods and families, at the bar, in political life, and in theological disputes, even where there is the manifestation of enraged and irascible feeling, there is often much of a certain kind of *wisdom*. There is learning, shrewdness, tact, logical skill, subtle and skilful argumentation—"making the worse appear the better reason;" but all this is often connected with a spirit so narrow, bigoted, and contentious, as to show clearly that it has not its origin in heaven. The spirit which is originated there is always connected with gentleness, calmness, and a love of truth.

McGee: James makes it very clear that strife and envying do not originate with God. They do not come from Him at all—it is “earthly, sensual, devilish.”

Knowledge is proud that she has learned so much; Wisdom is humble that she knows no more.

—Author unknown³⁵

³⁴ http://www.biblicaltheology.com/jam/59_00_00.html

ESV: earthly, unspiritual, demonic. James describes worldly behavior in terms that “progress” from bad to worse, recalling the list in vv. 5b–6. Such behavior is ultimately earthbound, absolutely sensual as opposed to spiritual, and its origin is in the cosmic powers of darkness.

The source of such false wisdom is clearly from earthly principles and earthly motives. It is sensual, indulging in the flesh, driven by base desires which we share with the rest of the animal kingdom.

James 3:16

For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work.

Worldly wisdom produces trouble. Wrong thinking produces wrong living. (James 4...) “Confusion” = disorder from instability; “unstable” in James 1:8; “unruly” in 3:8. Sets the stage for “every evil work.”

McGee: An uncontrolled tongue produces envying and strife which lead to “confusion and every evil work.” Scripture makes it very clear that God is not the author of confusion. The confusion we find in the world today is a confusion brought about by the work of the Devil using that little thing, the tongue, which causes so much trouble. This verse will tie in very closely with what James has to say in the next chapter where he will define what worldliness really is.³⁶

ESV: The final result of such Satan-driven conflict can only be disorder and every vile practice. “Disorder” (Gk. *akatastasia*) connotes a chaotic frenzy of fighting (cf. 4:1) in the church. The related adjective (Gk. *akatastatos*) means “unstable” (1:8) and “restless” (3:8).

Envy and selfish ambition produces confusion and disorder. The proprietor of such motivation is not truly concerned with the good of others, and is not going to contribute to the common good. By imposing one's personal lust for power or position, the Godly order of things is set off-balance. Things will not progress in a sound and loving manner, but rather in a manner which is reactionary (reacting to stimulus), and consequently unpredictable.

Such motivation produces decision making based upon rationalization rather than upon wisdom. Rather than seeking God's will, His will is presupposed and defended by arguments rationalized by that selfish desire.

Those who are lifted up with such false wisdom as this must fall into rebuke and condemnation.³⁷

³⁵ McGee, J. V. (1997). *Thru the Bible commentary* (electronic ed.) (Jas 3:15). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

³⁶ McGee, J. V. (1997). *Thru the Bible commentary* (electronic ed.) (Jas 3:16). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

³⁷ http://www.biblicaltheology.com/jam/59_00_00.html

James 3:17

But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.

Missler: Every good gift is from above: James 1:17.

Our citizenship is in heaven: Phil 3:20.

Our home is in heaven: John 14:1-6.

Our affection is focused above: Col 3:1-4.

Evidences of True Wisdom

Purity: Chaste, free from defilement. Cf. Jam 4:8. There is a worldliness that makes a person a spiritual adulterer. James 4:4.

Peace: Man's wisdom leads to competition, rivalry, and war (James 4:1-2). God's peace is based on holiness, not compromise. Isa 32:17.

Gentleness: Sweet reasonableness. Moderation without compromise; gentleness without weakness.

Carl Sandburg described Abraham Lincoln as a man of "velvet steel."

Compliance: Agreeable; easy to live with and work with. Yielding to persuasion. "Swift to hear, slow to speak; slow to wrath." James 1:19.

Mercy: "Full" = controlled by. Good fruits. The Spirit produces fruit to the glory of God (John 15:1-16).

Decisiveness: Singleness of mind; opposite of wavering (James 1:6).

Can your commitments be relied upon? Are you a fiduciary to those who trust you?

Sincerity: Openness, honesty, "speaking the truth in love" (Eph 4:15).

[wisdom that is from above is first pure] (Dake) Eight characteristics of divine wisdom:

1. Pure—chaste, holy and clean
2. Peaceable (Hebrews 12:14)
3. Gentle—meek, modest, and kind
4. Easily entreated—not stubborn or obstinate, but yielding to others
5. Full of mercy—always forgiving and performing acts of kindness
6. Full of good fruits (Galatians 5:22-23)
7. Without partiality—having no respect of persons (James 2:1-10)
8. Without hypocrisy—open, honest, genuine, and true

LAN: Have you ever known anyone who claimed to be wise but who acted foolishly? True wisdom can be measured by the depth of a person's character. Just as you can identify a tree by the type of fruit it produces, you can evaluate your wisdom by the way you act. Foolishness leads to disorder, but wisdom leads to peace and goodness. Are you tempted to escalate the conflict, pass on the gossip, or fan the fire of discord? Careful, winsome speech and wise, loving words are the seeds of peace. God loves peacemakers (Matthew 5:9).

The main characteristic of godly wisdom is that it is **pure**, meaning "free from defilement." Bitterness, envy, and selfish behavior thoroughly corrupt a person (vv. 14,

16). Godly wisdom is also **peaceable**, describing a spirit of tranquillity and calmness. It does not suggest compromising truth just for the sake of peace, which would promote falsehood. In addition, godly wisdom is undivided, without favoritism, unwavering, and consistent. **without hypocrisy**: True wisdom is sincere and unpretentious.³⁸

McGee: “But the wisdom that is from above is first *pure*”—that is, it’s not mingled or mixed; it’s undiluted; it’s the original. It is that wisdom which comes down from God, and James clearly identifies it: it is “then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.”

Dr. Samuel Zwemer mentions the fact that false teaching always produces strife and envy and trouble. He says, “You cannot explain the wickedness of the world as merely human. It is human plus something, and that is why non-Christian religions are successful. They are supernatural, but from beneath.” Anything that causes divisions and strife—it matters not which church it is in—is not of the Lord, you may be sure of that. You may boast of your fundamentalism, but if you are causing strife, you are sailing under false colors.³⁹

JNTC: Compare 1:5–8, 13–18. There are two kinds of **wisdom**. That which is **worldly, unspiritual** and **demonic** produces **jealousy** (or “bitter zeal”) and **selfish ambition**, followed by **disharmony and every foul practice** (see, for example, the lists at Ro 1:28–31, Ga 5:19–21). **But the wisdom from above** is “from the Father,” with whom “there is neither variation nor darkness” (1:17); it is extolled at Proverbs 8:22ff.⁴⁰

Chuck Smith: Oh, what a difference. That wisdom that is earthly, sensual, devilish, envying, striving, bitterness.

Now, what marks your life? What kind of wisdom comes forth from you? He says that you should show forth the wisdom by your manner of living. Demonstrate the wisdom. In reality our manner of life does demonstrate the source of our wisdom. And if I am constantly in strife, constantly in turmoil, constantly stirred up, constantly, you know, bad mouthing this person, that person, this thing, that thing, then that wisdom that I have is not of God. For the wisdom that comes from God has such marvelous characteristics, it's pure, it's peaceable it's gentle, easily intreated.

ESV: The answer to the “disorder” of v. 16 is to seek wisdom from above, which produces character qualities beginning with purity and concluding with peace (cf. Gal. 5:22–23, where godly qualities are the fruit of the Spirit). first pure, then. Purity (blamelessness) is the primary virtue, with the rest providing aspects of this moral purity. Peaceable is the polar opposite of “selfish ambition” and the discord it produces. Peace, further emphasized in James 3:18, is one of the critical attributes of the pure believer (Matt. 5:9; Gal. 5:22; Heb. 12:11).

³⁸ The Nelson Study Bible

³⁹ McGee, J. V. (1997). *Thru the Bible commentary* (electronic ed.) (Jas 3:17). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁴⁰ Stern, D. H. (1996). *Jewish New Testament Commentary : A companion volume to the Jewish New Testament* (electronic ed.) (Jas 3:13). Clarksville: Jewish New Testament Publications.

Contrast the wisdom of the world described in verses 14-16 with the wisdom from God. True wisdom is a gift of God. It is not gained by conversing with the world or by knowledge of the world, but rather it comes from above.

It is pure, without mixture of error which would defile it. It is guarded against sin, testing the spirits and motives against the love of God.

God's wisdom is peaceable. It is not going to incite strife or disunity, but rather, will move in ways to promote peace, reconciliation and restoration. It is gentle, not standing upon extreme right in matters of property, not furious in opinions, urging the will of self above others, neither rude, overbearing, harsh or cruel. All these are opposed to gentleness.

Heavenly wisdom contains the humility to be submissive to the Word and will of God whether it is perceived from scripture, the Holy Spirit, or even the testimony and works of other Christians. It doesn't insist that it is always correct, but can discern truth and be persuaded to change where error is evident..

The nature of Godly wisdom is to generate good works motivated by mercy and love. There will be a predisposition to forgive those who offend in all instances which present themselves.

Godly wisdom is impartial and sincere. The Greek word refers to a freedom from judging, making no undue differences in conduct towards individuals. It is sincere and open, steady and uniform, and consistent with itself.

It is a wisdom without hypocrisy. It has no disguises nor deceits.⁴¹

James 3:18

And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.

We reap what we sow. We are to inspect fruits (not gifts!)

It is a serious thing to be a troublemaker in God's family. One of the things God hates is to sow "discord among the brethren." Prov 6:16-19.

(When we examine passages like 4:1 and 4:11-12, we can infer that this gang had some rough meetings!)

[And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace]

Peacemakers are continually recommending this divine wisdom to others.

This section contrasts heavenly and earthly wisdom (*sophia*, Gk.). The wisdom of which James speaks is practical and relational, not philosophical or speculative. It is evidenced by godly attitudes and actions (vv. 13, 17, 18). James 4:1-5:20 further contrasts and develops, by way of illustration, the truths of this paragraph.

Christian Ethics, Character—James contrasted traits of earthly and heavenly wisdom. Through dedication to God one can live a good, humble life; this is the picture of

⁴¹ http://www.biblicaltheology.com/jam/59_00_00.html

wisdom. Wisdom is God's will in action, not human knowledge in competition. God's wisdom saturates life with qualities which cement good relationships with other people.

McGee: These are the fruits of faith. There must be righteousness before there can be peace. I wish this idea would reach the United Nations. I wish it would reach Washington, D.C., and Moscow and Peking and all the other capitals of the world. You cannot have peace without righteousness. There is a day coming, the psalmist says, when peace and righteousness will have kissed each other (see Ps. 85:10). Today they don't even know each other; they wouldn't even recognize each other.

Chapter 3 concludes the first major division of the Epistle of James in which James has dealt with the verification of genuine faith. There is a difference in faith: you can believe the wrong thing, or you can just nod your head and call that faith, but *saving faith* is that which produces good works.

In these three chapters James has shown various ways in which God tests our faith to prove that it is genuine. First of all, God tests faith by trials. Dr. Richard H. Seume is an outstanding Bible teacher who has suffered with kidney trouble for a number of years. I would like to share with you something which he said (as quoted by Dr. Lehman Strauss in his book, *James Your Brother*), because I know that it comes from a preacher who is not giving us his theory or his ideas but who knows what it means to suffer. Dr. Seume wrote:

Life on earth would not be worth much if every source of irritation were removed. Yet most of us rebel against the things that irritate us, and count as heavy loss what ought to be rich gain. We are told that the oyster is wiser; that when an irritating object, like a bit of sand, gets under the mantle of his shell, he simply covers it with the most precious part of his being and makes of it a pearl. The irritation that it was causing is stopped by encrusting it with the pearly formation. A true pearl is therefore simply a VICTORY over irritation. Every irritation that gets into our lives today is an opportunity for pearl culture. The more irritations the devil flings at us, the more pearls we may have. We need only to welcome them and cover them completely with love, that most precious part of us, and the irritation will be smothered out as the pearl comes into being. What a store of pearls we may have, if we will!

We saw, therefore, that (1) God tests faith by trials; (2) God does not test faith with evil; (3) God tests faith by the Word; (4) God tests faith by attitude and action in respect of persons; (5) God tests faith by good works; and (6) God tests faith by the tongue. James has made it very clear that genuine faith will be evident in the life of the believer.⁴²

Let others reap the fruits of contentions and self promotion, and all the advantages they can attain through their actions. Let us go on peaceably, sowing the seeds of righteousness, and we may depend on the fact that our labor will not be in vain. "For light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart; and the work of righteousness shall be peace, and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance for ever."⁴³

⁴² McGee, J. V. (1997). *Thru the Bible commentary* (electronic ed.) (Jas 3:18). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁴³ http://www.biblicaltheology.com/jam/59_00_00.html