

James has told us in 1:26 that if we do not bridle our tongue our religion is worthless. Now in chapter three he drills down into the importance of the tongue in teaching and in everyday life. He exhibits a deep knowledge of the Old Testament to tell us that we should be using the power of speech carefully.

¹ Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. James 3:1 During this time in history the church had followed the traditions of the synagogue. That is because the thousands of new believers were all Jews who attended synagogue regularly and knew that pattern. It was a good pattern for the most part: elder led, reverence for the Scriptures, with open discussion. But one problem that came with the Jewish tradition was the reverential respect given to rabbis. To provide for a rabbi's needs was thought to attain favor from God. The term rabbi was sometimes taken to be more than teacher but as "my great one" (Matthew 23:5-7ⁱ). Many new Christians wanted to attain to that kind of position in the church. If a person was looking for the respect of men, they would be tempted to try to attain to this position. Perhaps that is why Jesus taught His followers not to be called rabbi (Matthew 23:8ⁱⁱ). Our flesh nature delights in the praise of man.

There is certainly a need for more teachers, but we need informed, humble, godly teachers. We need those who dedicate themselves to understanding the Scriptures while at the same time have a willingness to submit to its teachings and live as an example to others. A teachable spirit over time results in one who can teach. A person with a passion to learn the Word is a disciple, for disciple means "one who learns." To make disciples then means we are all called to become teachers to some extent (Matthew 28:19,20ⁱⁱⁱ). But what James is addressing here is the desire to be the dominant authority for respect.

The reason James *commands* them not to vie with one another to become a teacher is the fact that teachers will be judged with greater strictness. This does not mean that our sins will be punished more harshly, but rather that our deeds will be weighed by what we know (Luke 12:47^{iv}). All Christians will stand before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10^v; Romans 14:12^{vi}). Our works will be tested by fire. Some of our words and actions seem godly, but God looks on the heart. Only the words that issued from a pure heart at the leading of the Spirit will stand the fire (1 Corinthians 3:12-15^{vii}).

I have had teachers who endured to the end. They were godly men who taught me as much by their way of life as they did by their knowledge of the Scriptures. I witnessed their relationship with Jesus. I had others who had inspiring thoughts, but whose lives did not line up with their teaching. God will use the words of a person with impure motives when sharing the Scripture with God's sheep. But there is no reward for him. He will be judged more strictly for living a hypocritical example while knowing better.

We are accountable for what we teach (Luke 12:48^{viii}). The Word of God is His revelation to mankind. If we distort it, we distort the nature of God in people's minds. How many cults have begun because someone wanted to be the one everyone looked to for truth? They never end well. The followers set their eyes on the leader instead of Jesus. The power goes to the leader's head, and he or she will abuse it. Only by the grace of God will they leave and go on to live spiritually healthy lives. In some of the worse cases they are all led to commit suicide, as in the case of Jim Jones. He and all other false teachers will stand before God and be judged for the lives they destroyed.

Kent Hughes notes that the problems apply to secular teaching as well. *The position of teacher can be deluding in any context, secular or Christian. Allan Bloom, ...writes of the dangers which attend the classroom when an adult teacher spends his life in the company of undergraduate youths. "Such an adult," he says, "is subject to many temptations—particularly vanity and the desire to propagandize. ... "*^{ix}

² For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. James 3:2 There is a connection between this verse and the previous one, even though it seems to be a shift in thought. Verse one is a warning to those who want to be teachers to realize God will hold them accountable for what they teach. Verse two begins by broadening the importance of speech to include anyone.

First, James declares we are all sinners. *We all stumble in many ways.* As Paul puts it, *"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."* Romans 3:23 We inherited Adam's sinful nature. The glory of God is seen in the life of Jesus. If anyone tells you they no longer sin, in essence they are saying they are like Jesus. That is what we all should be striving toward. As Paul commanded Timothy, *"Train yourself in godliness."*¹ Timothy 4:7b Ask the person who thinks they have arrived if they would say they are completely conformed to the image of Christ. Is their life an expression of the glory of God, as Jesus' life was? That is a way to remind us that we all stumble in many ways.

But then James goes on to declare that the one who bridles his tongue is a perfect man.^x If you can do that, you can bridle your whole body. Is he contradicting himself? Or is he stating that perfection is impossible because we are unable to master the words that come out of our mouths? I believe his point is that our hearts are in the process of being sanctified. **The tongue is like a measuring rod toward perfection, more so than any other behavior.** Compare our words with our our Savior's, and we see how much we need to grow. He is the only human to perfectly bridle His tongue. That is the declaration of Scripture, for He declared that He only spoke what He heard from the Father who told Him what to say and how to say it (John 14:10^{xi}, 12:49^{xii}).

Our mouths are the source of so much sin and destruction. It is no wonder then that monks took vows of silence. They wanted to stop sinning and to learn to listen before they speak. But of course, as soon as they started speaking again, they would find they still had a problem. Man cannot bridle his speech because he cannot change his own heart. Only the Holy Spirit can do that when we yield to Him. **The life of a Christian is continually learning to yield to the Spirit (Galatians 5:17^{xiii}).**

Our flesh is at war with our spirit. By "flesh" I do not mean our body, but rather our old soul that was crucified with Christ. It keeps trying to take back the reins of our lives. It is a lifelong battle. When Paul said he had run the race and finished his course he did not mean he was perfect, but rather that he had done what God had called him to do (2 Timothy 4:7^{xiv}). He had given his all to the work God called him to do. He knew he would soon be executed and be home with His Savior.

³ If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. ⁴ Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. James 3:3,4 James goes into several illustrations to convince us of how powerful our tongues can be. His first illustration is the horse. Horses are one big mass of muscle. Put a 200-pound man on its back and it can still gallop for miles. We measure power with units

called horsepower. But put that little steel bit in the horse's mouth and we can steer it wherever we want that huge animal to take us. The mouth steers its whole body.

Enormous ships can be steered with rudders that are just fraction of the size of the ship. Whether it is a speedboat or a giant cruise ship, that rudder will determine the whole ship's direction regardless of powerful winds or currents against it. The pilot can use that little rudder to make the ship go the direction he determines.

⁵ So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! James 3:5 James is illustrating the power of the tongue to affect our entire lives. Though it is small like a bit or a rudder, its effect can be wonderful when inspired by the Spirit, or deadly and destructive when unleashed to express the carnal nature. We can see it so clearly in speeches given by Adolph Hitler. He spoke, or perhaps I should say yelled, with such conviction that his audience was mesmerized. But what he spoke was the lie of a superior race based on evolution. He painted the Jews and those with non-Arian features to be less evolved and therefore more animal like and needing to be eliminated from the gene pool. The result was the extermination of millions of Jews.

Mao had a similar effect on China. His victims were the educated elite. The result was similar with millions slaughtered and millions more dying of starvation. The words of these two men killed as many people as soldiers died in two world wars. It is said that words are mightier than swords. We can say they are as deadly too. James compares it to match setting a forest on fire. We have seen fires in California and here in Arizona and more recently in Canada that destroyed hundreds of thousands of acres of forest. All of them start with a small initial blaze. Those fires are likened to a few words spoken in anger that can have repercussions greater than we would ever have imagined.

⁶ And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. James 3:6 There are many parts of our body, but James says the tongue has the ability to stain the whole body. Sin is referred to as a stain (Jeremiah 2:22^{xv}). Jesus said, *¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person.* Matthew 15:18 A flurry of words spoken in anger will forever affect the way the recipient sees that person. No matter how great the apology and time that passes, it will not be forgotten. Even if forgiven, it will remain in the background of that relationship. Hasty words have ruined the career of many a politician, for people feel those words were insight into who the person really is, and to some degree that is true.

In pre-marital counseling I discuss phrases that should never be spoken in a marriage, such as "I hate you!" "I wish I had never married you." To call your spouse a vile name. It can be forgiven, but in the end, you are hurting yourself, for you have sown doubt into your relationship. You may feel that way at the moment, but feelings pass. Words spoken cannot just pass.

This destruction of relationships and marriages sets on fire the entire course of life. If your parents screamed some condemning words at you, you probably never forgot it. When we meet with the homeless, we often hear of the harsh experiences of their home life. Except for the grace of God bringing healing, the tension will remain.

James adds a frightening thought. Those destructive words are set on fire by hell. Satan loves division, hatred, enmity, and resentment. He loves to destroy families. Look at the chaos in our nation. Harsh words set on fire by hell are destroying the family which

is the foundation of society. Lying words for power or financial gain have broken trust in our systems. The fires in our forests are nothing compared to the fires set by words ignited by hell. Broken hearts and lives, drug addiction and suicide are so often from the power of words that cannot be forgotten.

James was not exaggerating when he wrote they are set on fire by hell. How could those Hamas invaders do such unspeakable acts to Israelis? They heard words from their youth at home and in school of how evil Israelis are. The teaching they received dehumanized the Israelis until they no longer viewed them as people. The poverty they endure is blamed on the Jews instead of on their leaders and their previous acts of violence. Words, set on fire by hell, setting on fire the entire course of life. The Greek is literally “wheel of life.” The fire from words comes round again and again affecting one’s entire life resulting in broken homes and even wars with untold suffering.

After 9/11 there was an attempt to get at the root of why such senseless loss of life happened. We learned the source was the radical Madras schools in Saudi Arabia which indoctrinated children from their youth that America must be destroyed for Sharia Law to bring heaven on earth. Children are taught that all problems stem from the existence of the evil USA and Israel. The hijackers truly believed they were serving God and saving the world. That is the power of words. The one who came to kill, steal, and destroy lit the fire using words, and he laughs at all the resulting loss and pain (John 10:10^{xvi}).

⁷ For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, James 3:7 In Genesis chapter one, God gave dominion over the creatures of the earth to mankind (Genesis 1:26^{xvii}). We train creatures from dolphins to dogs to help us do tasks we could not otherwise do on our own. We can train monkeys to use sign language. I have seen a parakeet do simple math and ride a miniature bicycle, hawks capture birds for their trainer, and even tigers are taught to perform. I have even watched as a diver pet the head of an enormous, fanged eel in the sea.

⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰ From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. James 3:8-10 A horse can be broken to yield to man in just a matter of one day but try as we may for our entire life, and we find our tongue will suddenly go wild. No human can tame it! The restless evil and deadly poison in the heart will issue forth from the tongue. Just when we think we have finally mastered it, someone provokes us again and out pours the poison like a gushing fountain. I put a sticky note on my mirror that read, “No Whining! Only Praise!” I need a constant reminder!

We come to church and sing God’s praise and go home thanking God for his goodness, telling our spouse how grateful we are to be married to them. Then that evening certain buttons get pushed, at least from our perspective, and that same mouth spews the poison to the love of our life who was made in the image of God. Or we turn on the TV and hear some news report we disagree with and start raging against the news anchor who was also made in the image of God, and they cannot hear a word we say. Blessing God and cursing those made in His image. And to make it worse, we justify it with excuses. God have mercy on us. Are we hopeless?

¹¹ Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. James 3:11,12 This is one of James’ questions that get us to look

at what we are doing to see if it lines up with who we declare ourselves to be. James is again appealing to Genesis chapter one. Everything produces after its kind (Genesis 1:24^{xviii}). Are we deceiving ourselves in thinking we are a new creation in Christ? What is our well producing? Is it the fresh water of praise, encouragement, thanksgiving, and prayer for the lost, or is it whining and murmuring about sinners not realizing we are one? What is our fruit? Is it the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, and patience? Or is it the fruit of the flesh: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, etc. (Galatians 5:19-23^{xix})? Are we saved?

We do not instantly become holy in our actions and words, but a transformation began when we received Jesus. It continues to this day. It will continue until the day Jesus calls us home and finishes the work in us (Philippians 1:6^{xx}, 3:21^{xxi}). No human can tame the tongue, but the Holy Spirit can empower us to refuse the old nature and walk in the Spirit. And when we are triggered by someone's words, the Spirit can help us hold our tongue and even answer with grace. He will be faithful to show us the root of our anger if we will ask Him. Pride, disappointment when things do not go as we like, selfishness or some other carnal desire is often the root of our ungodly words. We know when we are about to yield to the old nature. We call it a check in the Spirit. He whispers, "Don't say it! Pray. Ask your heavenly Father for the words." Sometimes He just tells us not to respond, but to examine our own heart. The words that irritate us may be the best thing we could hear for our spiritual growth.

Apostle Paul tells us, *⁶ Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.* Colossians 4:6 And to Timothy he writes, *²⁴ And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, ²⁵ correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, ²⁶ and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.* 2 Timothy 2:24-26 If we see the person opposing us is a captive who needs to be set free, a potential brother or sister in Christ, one for whom Jesus died, our whole attitude in response to their opposition will be entirely different. Instead of defending ourselves, we will be desiring to help them out of darkness and into the light, exalting Jesus as the answer to their captivity.

No human can tame the tongue, but if we are in Christ, the Spirit of God in us can make all the difference. But we must yield to Him and be willing to cooperate with His gentle voice. We must come to the Christlike *"not my will but Yours be done"* Luke 22:42b). We must run to the grace of God when we stumble and utter those harsh words or when others speak them to us. For only in Christ can we find the help we need to tame our tongue or forgive others.

Remember, *²⁶ If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.* James 1:26 So on the one hand he has told us if we don't bridle our tongue our religion is worthless. On the other hand, he has told us no man can tame the tongue. The implication then is that our religion, which is our faith in Jesus and His transformative power at work in us, will do the work we cannot do. Just as we were saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8,^{9xxii}), so the bridling of our tongue is a work of the grace of God through faith. Every step of inner and outer sanctification is by God's grace that we receive through faith (Romans 6:13,^{14xxiii}). Looking into the mirror of the Word we see how we fail so miserably, but we

also see God's power is perfected in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9^{xxiv}). Our stumbling humbles us. That is a blessing, for pride goes before destruction (Proverbs 16:18^{xxv}). Humility helps us lean on the Lord. With humility comes wisdom (Proverbs 11:2^{xxvi}).

Life and death are in the power of the tongue (Proverbs 18:21^{xxvii}). Jesus warned us that we will give an account of every careless word we speak (Matthew 12:36^{xxviii}). Therefore, let us go to the throne of grace that we might find mercy and grace to help us with this great need (Hebrews 4:16^{xxix})! May we die daily to our sinful nature that Christ may live in us (1 Corinthians 15:31^{xxx}). At the same time, do not live in condemnation (Romans 8:1^{xxxi}). Jesus has paid the debt of sin for all who put their trust in Him. He tells us that He loves us with an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:3b^{xxxii}). He is the One who will finish the work He has begun in us (Philippians 1:6^{xxxiii}).

If you are here this morning and have not received Jesus who died for your sins and longs to forgive you of the harm your words have caused, His grace is reaching out to you and inviting you to receive His love for you.

Questions:

- 1 Why did James caution us about being a teacher?
- 2 What are the two general types of teachers?
- 3 Does this apply to secular teachers?
- 4 What is the seeming contradiction? Resolution?
- 5 Why is the tongue a spiritual thermometer?
- 6 What are James two illustrations of the power of the tongue?
- 7 What is the illustration of the damage the tongue can cause?
- 8 What did Jesus say about this?
- 9 What did James say should never be?
- 10 How can we deal with our tongue?

ⁱ **Matthew 23:5-7 (ESV)**

⁵ They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, ⁶ and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues ⁷ and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.

ⁱⁱ **Matthew 23:8 (ESV)**

⁸ But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers.

ⁱⁱⁱ **Matthew 28:19-20 (ESV)**

¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

^{iv} **Luke 12:47 (ESV)**

⁴⁷ And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating.

^v **2 Corinthians 5:10 (ESV)**

¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

^{vi} **Romans 14:12 (ESV)**

¹² So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

^{vii} **1 Corinthians 3:12-15 (ESV)**

¹² Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— ¹³ each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. ¹⁴ If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a

reward. ¹⁵ If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

^{viii} **Luke 12:48 (ESV)**

⁴⁸ But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.

^{ix} R. Kent Hughes, *James, Faith that Works*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991), 127.

^x signifies "having reached its end" (*telos*), "finished, complete, perfect." It is used (l) of persons, (a) primarily of physical development, then, with ethical import, "fully grown, mature," (1 Cor 2:6; 14:20)("men;" marg., "of full age"); Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament and New Testament Words.

^{xi} **John 14:10 (ESV)**

¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works.

^{xii} **John 12:49 (ESV)**

⁴⁹ For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment— what to say and what to speak.

^{xiii} **Galatians 5:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.

^{xiv} **2 Timothy 4:7 (ESV)**

⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

^{xv} **Jeremiah 2:22 (ESV)**

²² Though you wash yourself with lye and use much soap, the stain of your guilt is still before me, declares the Lord GOD.

^{xvi} **John 10:10 (ESV)**

¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

^{xvii} **Genesis 1:26 (ESV)**

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

^{xviii} **Genesis 1:24 (ESV)**

²⁴ And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds—livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds." And it was so.

^{xix} **Galatians 5:19-23 (ESV)**

¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

^{xx} **Philippians 1:6 (ESV)**

⁶ And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

^{xxi} **Philippians 3:21 (ESV)**

²¹ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

^{xxii} **Ephesians 2:8-9 (ESV)**

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

^{xxiii} **Romans 6:13-14 (ESV)**

¹³ Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. ¹⁴ For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

^{xxiv} **2 Corinthians 12:9 (ESV)**

⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

^{xxv} **Proverbs 16:18 (ESV)**

¹⁸ Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.

^{xxvi} **Proverbs 11:2 (ESV)**

² When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom.

^{xxvii} **Proverbs 18:21 (ESV)**

²¹ Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.

^{xxviii} **Matthew 12:36 (ESV)**

³⁶ I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak,

^{xxix} **Galatians 5:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.

^{xxx} **1 Corinthians 15:31 (ESV)**

³¹ I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day!

^{xxxi} **Romans 8:1 (ESV)**

¹ There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

^{xxxii} **Jeremiah 31:3b (ESV)**

^{3b} I have loved you with an everlasting love;

^{xxxiii} **Philippians 1:6 (ESV)**

⁶ And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.