

1. **Introduction:** The saying that “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me” is false. Words can do great damage.
 - Words that hurt may be deliberately malicious or inadvertent, truth or lies, normal language or profanity, hateful, spiteful, hostile, contemptuous, and on and on.
 - James continues to emphasize that speech has inordinate power to influence events.
2. **James 3:3-4: 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.**
 - Words have such a powerful influence on events that controlling words controls events much like controlling a ship’s path with its small rudder or a bit in a horse’s mouth controls its behavior.
3. **James 3:5: 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!**
 - The illustrations of 3:3-4, directing a horse and steering a ship, are neutral. Each example could produce desirable or undesirable results. But the example of 3:5 calls to mind the potential danger that exists whenever we speak.
 - Just as a small spark can set a forest on fire, so the tongue gossiping, slandering, bickering, or lying can lead to disaster among people. Such abusive language can assassinate people’s character, destroy their reputation, even break up a church.
 - Words can build unity or destroy it, can either encourage helping others or encourage attacking them. Words can lead to wonderfully good results or dreadfully bad results.
4. **James 3:6-8: 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.**⁷ **For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind,**⁸ **but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.**
 - Notice the strong language James uses to describe the tongue, the implement that enables speech. He is referring to the speech of sinful people.
 - The tongue (1.) is a world of unrighteousness, (2.) defiles the whole body, (3.) sets on fire the entire course of our life. (4.) Its unrighteous use is energized by hell.
 - The implication of these strong words is that all kinds of inequity find an outlet through the actions of the tongue. For example, it seems impossible to be angry without expressing that anger through words (and actions).
 - If we are bitter, it will sour our speech. Hate cannot avoid being expressed in words.
 - Peace and love, rage and hate, all find expression in words flowing from the tongue.
 - Next, James refers to the tongue as being untamable. Every kind of beast can be tamed by humans, but they cannot tame their own tongue.

- As mentioned before, he means sinful people cannot on their own tame their tongue.
- But God can transform our spiritual heart and enable us to control our tongue.

5. **James 3:9-12: 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.*** 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 continues his description of the problems associated with the tongue of sinful people. The two-faced, inconsistent character of our inner being is revealed through our contradictory flow of words.
- One instant, we praise God and with the next breath we blaspheme Him or a fellow human, who like us bears the image of God.
- That is like a spring that produces, simultaneously, both salt water and fresh water.
- The salt water contaminates the whole flow, making it impossible to know that pure fresh water is present. Just so, our curses overpower our praise.

6. **What is the Problem:** James attacks the sometimes-rotten nature exhibited by the tongue. Does he mean the literal physical tongue is the problem?

- No! The words of our Lord reveal that the hidden but true culprit in sins of the tongue is the spiritual heart.
- The contents of our spiritual heart control the words we speak. The spiritual heart content may be neutral, good, or evil. Good heart content leads to good speech.
- Evil heart content leads to evil speech.
- For believers, heart content is likely mostly neutral or good, but there will be an evil remnant remaining from the defeated, but still present, old sin nature.
- For unbelievers, the heart's content may be partly or mostly neutral or good (God's common grace) or the ever-present sin nature may be actively strong and robust.
- The spiritual heart controls both our words and our actions. The good things we do are prompted by the good in our spiritual heart, the bad by the bad in our heart.
- A visit to a doctor may result in the instruction to "stick out your tongue." The physical condition of the tongue gives a doctor some diagnostic information about the health of our body.
- Likewise, the words that flow from our tongue give diagnostic information about the status of our inner being.
- James is saying, "as your tongue speaks, it witnesses to the health of your spiritual heart." Because speech has inordinate power for good or for evil, we must guard the contents of our heart so that what we say will be beneficial not hurtful.

7. **Matthew 12:34-37: You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.** ³⁵ ***The good person out of his good***

treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.³⁶ I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak,³⁷ for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.

8. **Matthew 15:18-19:** *But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person.¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.*

- Spoken words and other means of communication are neutral, neither friend nor foe.
- All means of communication are mechanisms through which the dictates of the spiritual heart are communicated.
- To enable speech (and action) that pleases God, we are to fill our spiritual hearts with God's Word and be obedient to Scripture's guidance.
- The contents of the spiritual heart determine the words we speak.
- In Scripture, the spiritual heart is that part of our inner being which contains the principles and precepts by which we live. The best description I know is that the spiritual heart is a person's "mission or activity control center."
- A godly activity center is necessary for our words and actions to be pleasing to God.
- The principles stored in our spiritual heart control speech, thoughts, and actions. All external behavior is controlled by the character of our inner being.
- When we encounter a difficult situation, it is our spiritual heart that brings forth a reaction to the difficulty. Recognizing that truth, we are to strive to align the contents of our spiritual heart with God's will. Paul tells us one important way to do that.

9. **Philippians 4:8:** *Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.*

- Words have remarkable power both for good or for evil. See Romans 10:9-10 on preaching the gospel, and Proverbs 18:21 on the power of life and death.
- People are entranced by the ability of words to build up or to tear down reputations and to destroy or create relationships. Gossip, lies, and rumors spread like wildfire.
- For each of us, controlling the words we say will be beneficial in training our spiritual heart (our Activity Control Center).
- Since the spiritual heart controls our thoughts, words, and actions, godly training of the spiritual heart will promote rightful control of the whole person. Everything we do communicates information to others.
- We communicate much more than specific bits of knowledge and wisdom, jokes or gossip, love or hate. Our entire life of action and interactions is a series of messages.

10. **James 3:13:** *Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom* (do good deeds in gentle wisdom).

- This is a rhetorical question. Everyone would like to be wise and understanding, but the truth is that some are wise, some unwise, and some fall in between. Indeed, individuals are wise in some areas, unwise in others, and in between on others.
- While many today think of meekness, humility, and gentleness as “wimpy” qualities, Scripture disagrees. We possess such qualities only as a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23).
- Wisdom and understanding can be either “worldly” or “from above.” In the Bible, wisdom can mean having technical expertise or capability of doing a job well.
- But wisdom from above means having the knowledge and skills and the judgement, perseverance, and power of choice to live a life that pleases God (possible only with regeneration and the help of the indwelling Holy Spirit).
- James’ aim in writing was to help people, who have received saving faith, to grow in “practical godliness,” to grow in thoughts, words, and actions consistent with God’s character, and honoring to Him and the people He created in His image.
- Scripture provides the necessary knowledge for knowing what God requires of us.
- The vital question is how does that knowledge impact our doing what God requires?
- Godly wisdom is the answer, but it must be utilized routinely if it is to be effective.
- James says we should frequently do good works driven by gentle wisdom from God.
- That means we should possess and practice the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23).
- The person wise in “wisdom from above” will reflect that wisdom in their lifestyle as they produce good works with gentleness. Strength should be used with gentleness and humility, not stridently or from impure motives.

11. ***James 3:14-16: But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.¹⁵ This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.¹⁶ For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.***

- James moves from describing someone who is wise and of good conduct to signs that indicate activities contrary to wisdom from above. The two signs he identifies are bitter jealousy (harboring hard feelings) and selfish ambition (an insatiable hunger to have more and always be top dog).
- Such things lead to boasting and lying. Such things do not result from “wisdom from above.” Don’t fall prey to worldly knowledge or wisdom that opposes God, such as “don’t get mad, get even!”
- Knowledge without wisdom from above is likely to be counterproductive. It often fills our hearts with the ingredients of bitter jealousy and selfish ambition.
- Selfish ambition is usually driven by envy. Envy and jealousy are opposites. Envy is an emptiness that wants to be filled. Jealousy is grounded in fear of losing something already possessed. Both envy and jealousy lead to disorder.

- By disorder James means more than just confusion. He means disharmony in relationships, antagonism, and the absence of unity and stability. These things are not consistent with wisdom from above but are earthly, unspiritual, and demonic.
- We are to be of good character, not two-faced or pretending to God to be what we are not. You can fool some people, but you can't fool God. We are to be totally open with God having a true inner consistency.

12. **James 3:17-18: But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.**

- “Worldly wisdom” is wisdom in which human feelings and reason reign supreme.
- “Worldly wisdom” may lead to worldly wealth and power, but it often opposes God’s truth. Wisdom from above is God’s truth. It is morally pure (in action and motive), is peaceful (helps heal relationships not destroy them).
- “Wisdom from above” provides a basis for accurate reasoning and is full of mercy, and good fruits. It is impartial and sincere. Every believer is expected to use wisdom from above to live a life pleasing to God.
- “Wisdom from above” comes to us through Scripture with our understanding enhanced by the indwelling Holy Spirit.
- We desire and seek for wisdom from above to be the controlling factor in our spiritual heart. Scripture warns against letting unwise things into our spiritual heart.

13. **NIV Proverbs 4:23: “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.”**