

# Faith Without Works is Useless

## An Expository “Journey” Through the **Epistle of James**

### 13- The Test of the Tongue

---

Church June 13, 2021

#### **James 3:1-12**

**1 Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.**

**2 For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.**

**3 Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well.**

**4 Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires.**

**5 So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!**

**6 And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell.**

**7 For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race.**

**8 But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.**

**9 With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God;**

**10 from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.**

**11 Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water?**

**12 Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.**

To the Glory of God

Now the Passage that Brother Jeff just read to us contains the single most detailed discussion in the entire New Testament on the use of our tongues. And it is obvious from this Passage that the half-brother of our Lord Jesus was well-

acquainted with the “Wisdom Literature” of the Old Testament Scriptures<sup>1</sup> and in the “Teachings” of the Lord Jesus<sup>2</sup>- because his *own* Teachings have several parallels. Both the book of **Proverbs** and what our Lord Jesus taught- spoke with great Conviction about both the *nature* and the *use* of the human tongue. And James walks in their shadow- because much of what he says is a powerful Testimony about the Sin and Failure that stain our speech. And nothing says this louder than verse 6:

**... the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell**

James’s words exemplify the central Purposes of the Teaching and Preaching of God’s Word. The resulting effect will be to “**reprove, rebuke, and exhort**” (2**Timothy 4:2**). But James’s message also exemplifies what the Apostle Paul calls the *usefulness* of sacred Scripture:

**... for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16)**

Now the immediate focus of James’s Teaching (as well as all “apostolic Teaching”) is to bring Christian believers to a place of “spiritual Maturity”. Here, as well as in other places, he is completely in harmony with the way the Apostle Paul employed all his God-given Powers:

**Colossians 1:28&29**

**28 We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ.**

**29 For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.**

James’s five Chapters constitute an extended piece of “pastoral Preaching” laced with Words of both Wisdom and Warning. And his Goal is to lead his readers (believers, who were once under his direct pastoral Care, but are now widely scattered)- to full “spiritual Maturity”, so that their “Union with Christ” would be complete.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Wisdom Books are also called, the “*Poetry and Wisdom Books*” and they are: **Job**; the **Psalms**; **Proverbs**; **Ecclesiastes**; and the **Song of Solomon**.

<sup>2</sup> The “*Teachings of Jesus*” are collected in the four Gospel Accounts: **Matthew**, **Mark**, **Luke**, and **John**

Now as I told in the beginning- the **Epistle of James** is a series of 14 “Tests” that are designed by God the Holy Spirit to do two things:

1. Determine whether we are truly saved or only *deceived* about Salvation
2. Bring those, who are truly saved- into a deep and real “spiritual Maturity”

... and, so far in this verse-by-verse “journey” through **James**- we have already had five “Tests” of true, genuine Salvation:

1. The Test of Perseverance in Suffering (1:2-12)
2. The Test of Confronting Temptation (1:13-18)
3. The Test of Speaking and Doing According to the Word (1:19-27)
4. The Test of Impartial Love (2:1-13)
5. The Test of True Faith (2:14-26)

... and now we are taking our sixth Test- the “Test of the Tongue”.

So, we are looking *honestly* and *fully* at **James 3:1-12** and comparing *ourselves* to what James infallibly teaches here. And for those, who come to the conclusion that they have only been deceived about their Salvation- I pray that understanding this Passage will help you to repent and trust in Jesus and be saved. And, for those who are truly saved- I pray that you will see in this Passage- yet another “Means of Grace” by which you can come into that “Maturity” in the Spirit- that you so crave.

Now- almost more than anything else- the *mastery* of the Tongue is one of the *clearest* marks of a “whole person”- a true Christian. So, “Tongue-mastery” is the fruit of “Self-mastery”- which is empowered by the Holy Spirit.

So, I want to look at this Passage from three angles:

1. I want to “walk” through **James 3:1-12** in order for us to feel the “weightiness” of its Truth
2. I want to set this Passage against the entire **Epistle of James**- because **James 3:1-12** is actually only the “tip of the iceberg” of what James has to say about our speech
3. I want to place the words of this Passage in the broader “gospel context” that lies behind the **Book of James**

## 1. James’ Teaching about the Tongue

Now as we go through **James 3:1-12**- what jumps out at us- is that this Passage has several different “basic driving Principles” in it like:

1. It is Hard to Tame the Tongue
2. The Tongue has Disproportionate Power
3. The Tongue Causes Destruction
4. There is great Inconsistency about the Tongue

... so, let's go over these together

## **1. It is Hard to Tame the Tongue**

### **James 3:1**

**Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.**

Here James issues a Warning to people who aspire to become Teachers: Perhaps they should reconsider. Why? Because God holds Teachers to a Higher Standard. Now why does God do that? Because people believe what Teachers say. And so, if Teachers say wrong things or incomplete things or even things that are Evil- and people believe what they say- those people will be deceived.

Now since it is true that we are saved by what we believe in- if people believe the *wrong* thing- then they won't be saved. And if they are not saved- they will spend all of Eternity in Hell. But if they believed the wrong thing because they were taught to believe the wrong thing by wayward Teachers- those people will still go to Hell. But the Judgment against the Teachers, who deceived them, will be *infinitely* worse.

And so, God holds those who teach to a higher Standard- to help keep this Office pure and to help make sure that those who teach

1. Are genuinely saved themselves
2. Know what they are talking about

Teachers should be conscious of the Weight and Influence of what they say because Words lie at the *heart* of the teaching Ministry. And for a Teacher to have an unreliable tongue- will bring about eternal Destruction for those who are taught- hence the "stricter Judgment".

Yet James does not write as someone who has "arrived." He is conscious of his own shortcomings- which is why he included himself in the first part of verse 2:

**For we all stumble in many ways...**

... so, James is not Self-righteous- assuming he can't fall himself. James doesn't possess a false "perfectionism". It is certain that James always had at the forefront of all his Teachings- the Reality that he himself didn't believe that his half-brother was God until after the Lord had risen from the dead. And that Reality humbled him and it tempered what he taught.

Yet James's Words are applicable far beyond those who are called to teach- because we all use our tongues. And so, if the mastery of the tongue is a sign of spiritual Maturity- it is so for all Christians- not only Teachers. Because how we use our tongues provides clear evidence of where we are- *spiritually*.

When I was a child- I was often sick. And when I would go to the doctor- one of the first things he would do- would be to tell me to stick out my tongue. And I never understood how- but he seemed to be able to tell a great deal about my health by looking at my tongue. I now understand that this was a natural example of a spiritual Truth. Because we can tell a great deal about the health of our hearts- by examining what comes out of our mouths. (**Matthew 12:34**).

So, as a "spiritual physician", James engages in this Passage in a rigorous "tongue analysis". And **James 3:1-12** is a laboratory in which both the analysis and the diagnosis of the condition of our souls may take place. Notice what James says:

The spiritually mature person is able to "bridle" his tongue.

... and that would be good enough. But then James goes further to say that the person who can bridle his tongue- is the master of his whole body.<sup>3</sup>

But the control of the tongue has both negative and positive aspects. On the one hand- it involves the ability to restrain the tongue in complete silence. But it also means being able to control it in gracious speech when that is required. And Sanctification in any area of our lives always expresses this double dimension. Truly, gracious speech and total silence- when appropriate- are together- the mark of the spiritually mature (**Colossians 3:1-17**).

Now as we studied several weeks ago- **James 3:1-12** is NOT this Pastor's first reference to speech. In **James 1:22-26**- he has already said that for a professing Christian to fail to bridle the tongue is to be guilty of Self-deception and he is proving that his "religion" is utterly worthless.

Yet with all this Truth- James is brutally truthful about himself. And he is forced to confess that nobody- except Jesus- has actually *succeeded* in mastering the tongue! So, our only Hope in all of this- as we pursue the Discipline of Self that leads to the mastery of the tongue- is that we belong to Jesus and so we are

---

<sup>3</sup> Some scholars take "body" here to refer to the Church. Many of the "spiritual masters" of Church history understood this to have a double reference.

ongoingly being made more and more like Him! And that means the Question is NOT- “*Have we arrived at having complete Mastery of our Tongue?*” - but rather, “*Are we fighting against NOT having Mastery?*” Because this battle for “vocal Holiness” is a long-running one. And this Battle needs to be waged- not on a *daily*- but on an *hourly* basis. Why? Because the Power of the Tongue is *Disproportionate*.

## 2. The Tongue has Disproportionate Power

### James 3:3-5

**3 Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well.**

**4 Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires.**

**5 So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!**

Here, James uses two very common and very vivid examples:

1. The tongue is like the bit in the mouth of a horse
2. The tongue is also like the rudder on a boat

Now a horse is a very glorious and a very powerful animal. And yet the tiny bit- placed into the horse's mouth- controls both the enormous power and the energy of the horse- while it is also used to give the horse direction. And James may well have been familiar with this picture from common experience in his own daily life. No doubt he had seen powerful Roman military horses. And he had probably heard stories of chariot races. But the point he makes here is that extraordinary Power and Influence is concentrated in one single small object. And then he likens that Reality with the tongue.

Likewise, large passenger and cargo ships were very common in the ancient world. For example, the ship that originally was to transport Paul across the Mediterranean Sea to Rome held 276 people (**The Acts 27:37**). And we know from ancient documents recovered that a large Roman ship, like the *Isis*, could carry a thousand soldiers. Yet such a huge ship was controlled by the turn of a small rudder!

So, it is with the tongue. The tongue is small. But its power, both for Good or for Evil- is completely *out of proportion* to its size. The Reformed Theologian, Bruce Waltke said,

“A fool’s tongue is long enough to cut his own throat”<sup>4</sup>

So, why does James speak this way? Probably out of both biblical knowledge and personal experience. The tongue carries into the world the breath that issues from the heart.

Now one of the great ironies of our 21<sup>st</sup> Century American Culture is that we don’t easily recognize how powerful for Evil the tongue is because we are so accustomed to its polluting influence. I have often wondered why people who smoke can’t smell the odor that gets into their hair and clothes and furniture. My mother always had an air filter running when she smoked and I asked her why. And she said, “*To get rid of the odor.*” And I said, “*Why don’t you just not smoke?*” and she replied- “*Because I love the smell.*” So, she loved the smell but wanted to try to get rid of the odor. Now aside from the fact that this was simply contradictory- it illustrates another important fact about the tongue.

Those who speak terrible and evil and sinful and wrong things- don’t sense it. They seldom realize what they’re doing. My mother didn’t realize that the smoke was getting into *everything*- and the filter was not helping. And those who speak with unwashed tongues don’t realize that what they say- goes into every area of their lives.

Yet there is another side to this, a wonderfully encouraging side. Scripture teaches us that the breath by which we express our deepest desires, instincts, and opinions- may produce helpful and pleasing fruit.

### **Proverbs 15:4a**

#### **A soothing tongue is a tree of life...**

... so, James sees the tongue as an instrument of extraordinary Power, out of all proportion to its size. And whatever its real, *physical* connection may be- its most *significant* connection is to the heart- and that is true whether hardened by Sin or recreated by Grace.

Now at this point James is concerned that we should have a sense of the convicting Power of his Teaching. And so, he began by addressing how hard it is to tame the Tongue. It is a word spoken *primarily* to bring conviction of Sin. For the Tongue is difficult- almost impossible- to tame naturally, because, as we have also seen, the Power of the Tongue is Disproportionate to its Size. And that leads us to the third Point:

### **3. The Tongue Causes Destruction**

---

<sup>4</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15*, NICOT [Eerdmans, 2004], 102).

### James 3:6-8

**6 And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell.**

**7 For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race.**

**8 But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.**

Here James uses more vivid Words and Phrases to describe the Tongue:

- A Fire (verse 6)
- A World of Iniquity (verse 6)
- That Which Defiles the Entire Body (verse 6)
- Sets on Fire the Course of our Life (verse 6)
- Is Set on Fire by Hell (verse 6)
- A Restless Evil (verse 8)
- Deadly Poison (verse 8)

Now a very small fire can destroy an entire forest. All it takes is an uncontrolled spark. So, it is with the tongue. A sharp word, a loose sentence, a callous aside can put events into motion that can't be stopped. Our Words have the ability to consume and destroy a life.

And James is very specific about the energy source for such Destruction. He said,

**[The tongue] sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell.**

Here, James uses the biblical term *Gehenna* for “**Hell**”- the “*Valley of Hinnom*” on the southern outskirts of Jerusalem. It served as the city dump- hence the reference to fire- which constantly burned to destroy garbage.<sup>5</sup>

It is possible that, had it not been for God to move on Joseph of Arimathea's heart- our Lord's body would have been thrown into Gehenna after He was taken down from the Cross. The Poor and many Criminals were, in fact, just thrown into the city dump after being crucified. And this would explain James' disgust here. But his point is that it is from just such a Hell that destructive words arise. And we need to remember that image when similar words flow out from our mouths.

---

<sup>5</sup> There are reports that Gehenna continued to be used as a dump through 1996 and beyond.



Many years ago, I was reading a picture quiz from a magazine. And in the quiz, there were various objects photographed from unusual angles. And the challenge was to guess what the objects actually were. One picture seemed to be a striking photograph of the moon with all its craters- a dark world of death. But when I turned the back to check the answer- I was shocked to find that it was a photograph of a human tongue! How appropriate that, when you look closely- the tongue appeared like an empty world of death and darkness- full of dangerous craters!

At the wedding- the Bride is so careful when they put her dress on- while the Groom is nervous as he adjusts that new silk tie. And that small gravy stain may actually be very tiny- but it can ruin everything! So, it is with the tongue and its words! No matter what Graces we may have developed, if we have not gained “tongue mastery”, we can undo ten years of Sanctification in five minutes with an unguarded or ill-disciplined comment. We must always remember that human beings are very fragile- so we must guard our tongues- so we won’t destroy them.

The unregenerate tongue roams the wilds, quick to defend itself, swift to attack others, anxious to subdue them, always marked by Evil. It mimics Satan in this respect, who, having rebelled against the God of Peace, can never have Peace. The devil “**roams about on the earth and walks around on it**” (**Job 1:77; 2:2**), and like a “**roaring lion**”- he seeks someone to devour (**1Peter 5:8**). And the tongue that is under his lordship always shares that tendency. It has a built-in need to guard its own territory; to destroy all rivals; to always come out on top; and to be the “king of the beasts”.

Now James shares the perspective of Paul and, also the psalmist when he said, “**THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE, WITH THEIR TONGUES THEY KEEP DECEIVING,**” “**THE POISON OF ASPES IS UNDER THEIR LIPS**” (**Romans 3:13; Psalm 5:9**). And whether suddenly or slowly, Life is eaten away and destroyed. Perhaps here there is an echo of **Genesis 3** and the deadly deceit of Eve by the serpent — with all its deadly and hellish consequences.

James, however unbelieving he might have been during Jesus’ early Ministry, has clearly absorbed his half- Brother’s Teaching and has been led by it to the multitude of Old Testament “Word Pictures” about the Power and destructive Ability of the tongue. If it is true that the “*pen is mightier than the sword*”- it is equally true that “*we can kill a man as easily with the words we use as with a physical weapon*” (**Matthew 5:21&22**).

Of course, all this is naturally true of the unregenerate man. The tragedy is- and it is this tragedy that surely concerns James here- that the same destructive Powers may be released within the believing community- as well.

The saintly Robert Murray M’Cheyne (1813-1843) resolved that when a fellow Christian’s name was mentioned in company, if he could not say anything

Good about him, he would refrain from all speech about him. Better that- than to be careless with fire and destroy **“the brother for whose sake Christ died” (Romans 14:15; 1Corinthians 8:11).**

The young Jonathan Edwards penned a number of his *“Resolutions”* around this theme. And they are worth noting:

- *Resolved*, Never to say anything at all against anybody, but when it is perfectly agreeable to the highest degree of Christian honor, and of love to mankind, agreeable to the lowest humility, and sense of my own faults and failings, and agreeable to the golden rule; often, when I have said anything against any one, to bring it to, and try it strictly by, the test of this Resolution.
- *Resolved*, In narrations never to speak anything but the pure and simple verity.
- *Resolved*, Never to speak evil of any, except I have some particular good call to it.
- *Resolved*, Let there be something of benevolence in all that I speak.<sup>6</sup>

How easily the failure to master the tongue can destroy the effect of every grace that had taken years to build into our lives! Introduce poison here and we endanger *everything!* The Apostle Paul wrote this in **Romans 3:19:**

**Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God;**

... and a generation ago, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones expounded that verse like this:

“Paul now points out . . . that when you realize what the Law is truly saying to you the result is that “every mouth shall be stopped.” You are rendered speechless. You are not a Christian unless you have been made speechless! How do you know whether you are a Christian or not? It is that you “stop talking.” The trouble with the non-Christian is that he goes on talking. . . . How do you know whether a man is a Christian? The answer is that his mouth is “shut.” I like this forthrightness of the Gospel. People need to have their mouths shut, “stopped.” . . . You do not begin to be a Christian until

---

<sup>6</sup> (Cited from Sereno E. Dwight’s *Memoirs of Jonathan Edwards in The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 1834 [reprinted by Banner of Truth, 1974], 1:xxi-xxii)

your mouth is shut, is stopped, and you are speechless and have nothing to say.”<sup>7</sup>

... here, Dr. Lloyd-Jones put his finger on the essence of true Conversion: the humbling of the proud, Self-sufficient heart and the breaking of our native Arrogance. Our tongues are so often the most obvious index of the ungodly drive at the center of our being.

But thanks be to God that the slaying of inner Pride and the illumination of our minds in Regeneration create a new Disposition and a new Affection. The true convert will have a Jacob-like limp in his speech as well as in his walk- because in spiritual anatomy (as distinct from physical anatomy), the heart and the tongue are directly connected to each other. So, the subduing of the heart leads to the silencing of the tongue and true, Spirit- empowered Humility *within* leads to Humility *expressed*. Only when we have been silenced by God’s Glory- are we in any position to begin to speak. And when we do, by God’s Grace, we speak as those who have first been silenced.

#### **4. There is Great Inconsistency about the Tongue**

##### **James 3:8-12**

**8 But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.**

**9 With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God;**

**10 from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.**

**11 Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water?**

**12 Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.**

Back when I would sit in from of the television and watch Cowboy and Indian movies on a 13” black and white set- I remember Indians only saying one thing:

“You speak with forked tongue”

...and that was about as bad as you could say about a person. It still is. And James agrees with that- but he brings to it a more profound analysis:

---

<sup>7</sup> D.M. Lloyd-Jones, *Romans, Exposition of Chapters 3:20–4:25, Atonement and Justification*, [Banner of Truth, 1970], 19)

“A forked tongue is connected to a forked heart.”

This is the Attributes of the “**double-minded man**” who is “**unstable in all his ways**” (James 1:8). It is not a noble weakness. It expresses a damnable Contradiction in our very being. It is an “*ought not to be*,” like a spring that spouts forth both fresh and salt water. Speaking with a forked tongue- blessing and cursing with the same tongue- is more contradictory than anything we find anywhere in all of God’s Creation. It is a perversion of the highest order; and it typifies the Depravity of the Fall better than almost anything else.

And I beg all of us to take notice of the Power of James’s own words. And please don’t try to soften the effect here. And please don’t wave your hand and say, “*Well, this doesn’t apply to me*”. Because God the Holy Spirit meant for James’ Words to be a sharp two-edged sword “**piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.**” (Hebrews 4:12).

We were created as the Image of God to bless God. But it is blatant hypocrisy; double-mindedness; and Sin for us to bless God and then casually curse those who have been made as His very Likeness.

So, the forked tongue of the double-minded person *enslaves* him or her. He or she *thinks* the unthinkable; and *speaks* unspeakable Contradictions. So, James is blood earnest as he rips up the consciences of his 1<sup>st</sup> Century readers- many of whom were, perhaps, once members of his flock in Jerusalem before being scattered abroad.

Now, one of the criticisms of expository Preaching is that there is so much Theology but very little Application. And now that James has “ripped up,” our consciences- why does he apparently give no practical counsel about *how* we are to deal with our tongues? Why is there seemingly no practical application?

The Answer is that this criticism of expository Preaching is unwarranted. Because the marvel of the Scriptures is that whenever there is an analysis in the New Testament letters about how sinful and wrong a particular behavior is- there is practical Counsel and practical Application written into the Teaching itself! Now it may not be immediately evident, but if we keep our minds and spirits in the Passage long enough; and if we learn to wait patiently on the Lord in his Word- it will become clear.

So, even where there are no obvious imperatives to tell us what to do next- specifically, they are almost invariably *implied* in the text, woven, as it were, into its very fabric. And this underscores the Reality that it is by *the Word itself* and not by ourselves- that we are sanctified. Did not James’s half- Brother pray

**“sanctify them in [or by] the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17)?**

So, in order to help us to grasp how James does this, it will be helpful, further, to consider how this particular Teaching on the tongue- fits in with the rest of this Epistle

### **James 3:1–12 in the Context of the Entire Epistle**

We are told in the sacred Record that when Job felt himself to be under special pressure in his Sufferings (and, unknown to him, under the specific assault of the Devil to destroy his enjoyment of God) he made **“a covenant with [his] eyes”** in order to bind on his heart the **“Pattern of Holiness”** he needed to develop (**Job 31:1**). And guarding the eyes implied guarding **“eyes in the heart”** as well as in the head.

Temptation, and therefore spiritual Compromise, often find their easiest access route to the heart through the eyes. By the same token, Sin may find its easiest exit route from our hearts through the mouth. The exhortation of **Proverbs 4:23** to **“keep your heart with all vigilance”** is *immediately* followed in the next verse with an Exhortation to **“Put away from you a deceitful mouth And put devious speech far from you”**. And that means that **“guarding the heart”** *involves* **“guarding the tongue”**. So, to apply Job’s Principle to our present subject (the tongue), we need to learn to say, *“I will make a covenant with my tongue.”* And this is what James helps us to do all through his inspired Letter.

So, based on that- and using Jonathan Edwards’ logic- let me give twenty verses on the use of the tongue that we can find throughout the **Epistle of James**:

#### **James 1:5-8**

**But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.**

#### **James 1:9&10**

**But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory [boast] in his high position; and the rich man is to glory [boast] in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away.**

#### **James 1:13**

**Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone.**

**James 1:19**

**This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger;**

**James 2:1-4**

**My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, "You sit here in a good place," and you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?**

**James 2:12**

**So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty.**

**James 2:15&16**

**If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?**

**James 3:14**

**But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth.**

**James 4:1**

**What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?**

**James 4:11**

**Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it.**

**James 4:13&15**

**Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit."**

**Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that."**

**James 5:9**

**Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door.**

**James 5:12**

**But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but your ayes is to be yes, and your no, no, so that you may not fall under judgment.**

**James 5:13**

**Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises.**

**James 5:13**

**Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises.**

**James 5:16**

**Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.**

**James 5:19&20**

**My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.**

Now please indulge me a little further as I seek to consider this Passage in James- in the context of the Gospel itself.

### **James 3:1–12 in the Context of the Whole Gospel**

When we take one step back from **James 3:1-12** and reads it in the context of the entire Epistle- we discover that James's searing analysis is surrounded by the most practical application to enable us to master the tongue and to speak well for God.

But when we take yet another step back and view his words through the wide-angle lens of the entire biblical Gospel- we are able all the more clearly to understand and appreciate what James is “doing” when he speaks as he does.

Now it is well known, that in his early days as a Reformer, Martin Luther thought that the Epistle of James was “an epistle full of straw” and he said,

“In sum the gospel and the first epistle of St. John, St. Paul’s epistles, especially those to the Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians; and St. Peter’s first epistle, are the books that show Christ to you. They teach everything you need to know for your salvation, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or hear any other teaching. In comparison with these, the epistle of St. James is an epistle full of straw, because it contains nothing evangelical.”<sup>8</sup>

What is NOT well known is that Luther would later think better of it.<sup>9</sup> For the truth is that James’s teaching cannot be rightly interpreted without realizing that it is rooted in the Teaching of and energized by the Grace of “**faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ**” (**James 2:1**).

And so, in that light- we can discern a profoundly “Gospel-centered Pattern” in what James is seeking to accomplish as a Pastor of the souls of his readers. And his “Gospel method” is in three steps:

### **1) Realize That the Depth of Your Sin, the Pollution of Your Heart, and Your Need of Saving Grace Are All Evidenced in Your Use of the Tongue**

This is the method of Grace from beginning to end. And it is nowhere more starkly illustrated than in the experience of the Prophet Isaiah. And there is no more powerful a Passage in the entire Old Testament than **Isaiah 6**. Yet this Chapter is often read as if it were detached from **Isaiah 1–5**. And when we make the mistake of reading **Isaiah 6** in isolation- we miss a very clear pattern into which it fits.

You see, in Chapters 1-5- the Prophet has been ripping up the consciences of his sinful contemporaries. And he does so in a series of six “woe” Pronouncements (**Isaiah 5:8, 11, 18, 20, 21, & 22**). God’s holy Anger burned against them (5:25). And like a shepherd whistling for his dogs to come to tend the sheep, Yahweh will

---

<sup>8</sup> From Luther’s 1522 preface [to the New Testament], cited from *Martin Luther, Selections from his Writings*, [Doubleday, 1962], 19.

<sup>9</sup> Later experience with Antinomianism would clarify his thinking on the importance and value of James’s perspective.



call on the nations to come as his servants, with arrows sharp as flint, with horses' hoofs like flint, with roaring like a lion.

Darkness and distress will ensue — the terrible Judgment of the Holy One of Israel (**Isaiah 5:26-30**). But for the sensitive Bible reader the appearance of *six* Woes creates an expectation that a climatic *seventh* Woe is about to be pronounced. But against whom will Isaiah pronounce that *ultimate* Woe?

And the answer follows in chapter 6. The Prophet meets with the exalted God- Whose majestic Presence seems to flood the Temple. And Isaiah sees creatures who are perfectly and perpetually holy cover their faces before the Glory of the One Who is eternally, infinitely, inherently, un-createdly, Holy. And everything around Isaiah seems to disintegrate and everything within him seems to fall apart. He is “lost,” or “ruined” (**Isaiah 6:5**). And his language expresses the stunned silence that people feel when they are in the presence of a major Disaster or even Death<sup>10</sup>

So, this is Isaiah's “twin towers” day- the “9/11 moment” in his spiritual Experience. From his assumed Security- he had pronounced six devastating Condemnations on other people and groups. But now he realizes that the last and final “Woe” must be pronounced against- *himself!* And why is that?

### **Isaiah 6:5b**

**... “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.”**

You see, dear friends, we foolishly assume that our real Struggles with Sin are in the areas where we are “weak.” But we really don't understand the depth of Sin and our relationship with it- until we realize that Sin has made its home in us- where we are “strong”- in our gifts- and NOT in our weaknesses and inadequacies. It is in the very giftedness that God has given us- where Sin has been at its most perverse and subtle!

And only when we are graciously brought to see this- stripped bare of our layers of Self-deceit and led to Repentance- only *then* can God make something of us.

Many seem to find speech easy. Recent generations have, after all, been educated to be able to speak, to contribute to discussion and debate, to express themselves by the spoken word rather than by writing. Yet it rarely seems to strike us that it is precisely here, therefore, in our speech, that Sin is most likely to abound.

---

<sup>10</sup> See, J.A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* [InterVarsity, 1993], 77).

And so, only when we have been brought to such a Recognition do we realize how dangerous and destructive our tongues have been. Only *then* do we cry out to God in Repentance and run to Him with tears to seek Forgiveness in the Gospel.

Then we need to grasp a second Principle.

## **2) Recognize That You Are a New Creation in Christ**

At the beginning of his Argument, James had urged his hearers, “You need to recognize that you have become a new Creation in Christ Jesus, indeed a kind of first-fruits of His Creation” (compare with 1:18). In other words, *“I may not yet be that mature man I want to be. But thank God that I am not the old man that I once was!”*

What a great way to think about an ordinary Christian life! We live in a created Order marred by sin. And that Sin has twisted and polluted our speech. But God has begun His Work of “New Creation” and has inaugurated aspects of it that will be consummated when Jesus comes back. Then in the “regeneration” of all things (**Matthew 19:28**) every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.<sup>11</sup>

But notice carefully how God regenerates us: **“Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first-fruits of his creation.”** Regeneration is a sovereign Work of God, yes; but it does not ordinarily take place in a vacuum. Since it involves having our eyes opened to see the Kingdom of God (**John 3:3**), God ordinarily regenerates us in the context of the Truth of the Gospel- illuminating our minds. And so, we have a “Spiritual Principle”:

### **Truth placed FIRST in the mind- forms Truth in the heart**

... which is the very thing for which David prayed in **Psalm 51:10** and which he realized would lead in turn to transformed speech:

**13 Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, And sinners will be converted to You.**

**14 Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation; Then my tongue will joyfully sing of Your righteousness.**

**15 O Lord, open my lips, That my mouth may declare Your praise.**

---

<sup>11</sup> The translation “**the new world**” (ESV) is a rendering of the Greek *palingenesis*, which elsewhere is translated “**regeneration**.” The present renewal of regeneration is best seen as a present participation in the final, cosmic transformation that will take place at the return of Christ.

How important for us to recognize the Power of the New Birth to *create* new Affections in us- which, in turn, come to expression in the new “speech patterns” of the Gospel!

### 3) Continue in the Word

The work of the Word *initiates* the Christian Life, but it also *sustains* its Progress. My tongue is *ongoingly* cleansed and transformed by what comes from God’s Tongue in Scripture. As the heart hears with open ears the Word of God again and again, it is renewed and begins to produce a transformed tongue. The Principle is this:

**As Christians, what comes out of our mouths is more and more determined by what has come out of “the Mouth of God.”**

... in other words, the Sanctification of the Tongue is a Work in us that is driven by the Word of God coming to us as we hear it; and indwelling us as we receive it.

This was the “secret” of the Lord Jesus’ own use of His Tongue. Matthew sees our Lord Jesus as fulfilling the Prophecy of the *first* of the “Servant Songs” in the second half of the Prophecy of Isaiah:

**Matthew 12:19-21** (quoting **Isaiah 42:2&3**)

**19 "HE WILL NOT QUARREL, NOR CRY OUT; NOR WILL ANYONE HEAR HIS VOICE IN THE STREETS.**

**20 "A BATTERED REED HE WILL NOT BREAK OFF, AND A SMOLDERING WICK HE WILL NOT PUT OUT, UNTIL HE LEADS JUSTICE TO VICTORY.**

**21 "AND IN HIS NAME THE GENTILES WILL HOPE."**

... and if we ask how this was true in Jesus’ Life- the Answer is found in the *third* “Servant Song”:

**Isaiah 50:4-6**

**4 The Lord God has given Me the tongue of disciples, That I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word. He awakens Me morning by morning, He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple.**

**5 The Lord God has opened My ear; And I was not disobedient Nor did I turn back.**

**6 I gave My back to those who strike Me, And My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard; I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting.**

The single most important Aid to my ability to use my tongue for the Glory of Jesus is allowing the Word of God to dwell in me so richly that I cannot speak with any other accent. When I do, the result is

**... teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father. (Colossians 3:16&17)**

And that is why it is so important to be under a Ministry of the Word where the Scriptures are expounded with the Grace and Power of the Holy Spirit. It is by this means- along with our own private Study- that the Word of God begins to do its own spiritual Work in us. As words that have been formed in God's Mouth are digested as the Bread of Life by us, they begin to form our Thinking; our Affections; and our Volitions in a wonderful way.

The Lord Jesus came into the world to bear the Judgment of God against our Sins. And that includes the Sins of our tongues. So, do you speak like someone who "sounds" a little like Jesus because you have found pardon and renewal in Christ, and now his Word dwells richly in you?

I pray so- because at the end of the day, that is what "spiritual Maturity" *looks* like- or better- *sounds* like- because of the ongoing transformation of our use of the tongue.

Amen. Let's pray.

© 2020-2021 by The Covenant of Peace Church. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America

The Covenant of Peace Church 13600 John Clark Road Gulfport, Mississippi 39503 228.832.7729 [www.covenantofpeace.net](http://www.covenantofpeace.net)  
Scripture quotations, except those noted otherwise, are from The New American Standard Bible © 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

This is a single transcript in a larger series of teachings taken from a verse by verse "journey" through the **Epistle of James**. You are free to reproduce it and distribute it as the Lord leads you- without cost or reimbursement to us with the stipulation that you may not add anything or take anything away from this transcript without the express written permission of The Covenant of Peace Church and that this complete copyright statement be at the end of all copies.

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. Be watchful and quicken your pace. Soli Deo Gloria. For the Glory of God alone.