

The Weight of Our Words, Part 2

James 3:5-12

June 9, 2024

James chapter 3, we will be continuing today in the section that we started last week, the section of the letter of James on the subject of the importance of Christian speech, the importance of how we use our tongue. And just once again, as a reminder when we talk about this topic, you should apply it to text messages, emails, social media comments you make. Ah, now it's getting more convicting, huh? That is part of the words that we use. We're really talking about is the words that come from us, what comes out of our hearts. That is often seen in those places, too. So don't try and get yourself off the hook by applying this passage and passages like it, by just being quiet all the time and only being obnoxious online. It doesn't work.

What we saw last week, and how we were introduced to this section in James 3:1-12, that while the use of the tongue,

warnings, instructions about the use of our words are all over the Bible, and they're even brought up in other places in this short epistle of James, it is this section in James, James 3:1-12, that is the longest and probably the most well-known section in the Bible on this subject. So last week we looked at the first four-and-a-half verses in this chapter, and we saw James teach us about the tremendous responsibility that we have with our mouths, that we have with our tongues.

Because what we say can have such a big impact on others and on ourselves, James tells his readers that not many of them should want to be teachers; he says that in verse 1. It's because of the truth that "we all stumble in many ways," as he goes on to explain, and because of that truth—we all stumble in many ways—and the truth that words have a tremendous impact, an impact that is completely disproportionate to the size of the tongue as compared to the rest of the body, and because sinning with our words is one of the easiest ways of the many ways for us to stumble, then it just makes sense that not many should want the, somewhat in that light, terrifying responsibility of using words to teach the word of God to others.

So this statement in verse 1 lays the foundation for the entirety of the section, and that James really wants his people to understand that words are important. They carry so much weight and consequence to them, and he wants them to understand that—that if we really understood this principle, the principle of the weight of words, then not only would it cause us to be fearful of the prospect of becoming a teacher because of the great potential for destruction, there, but it would also lead us to be much more careful of the stewardship of all of our words, whether we teach or not.

If you remember, verse 2 then goes on to show us that because of the difficulty of restraining the tongue, because of the immense responsibility to restrain the tongue, we can understand that if we are able to do this, if we are able to restrain the tongue, bridle the tongue, if we can do that through the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit, and we can see ourselves having victory and growth in this area of life, then in turn, we can be encouraged that if we can overcome and put off sin and wickedness and put on righteousness, graciousness, and kindness when it comes to our speech, then in turn we can be

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confident that we will see the same results in any other area that we might be struggling with.

And contrary to how some use this verse as an excuse to kind of feel fine with continual failure to mortify sin in their life, using it to essentially say, "Well, no one's perfect," what it actually does is serve to give great encouragement that we can and will see patterns of sanctification and growth and godliness where once there only existed slavery to sin. As we diligently work, through the power of the Holy Spirit in a grace-driven effort to sanctify our speech, we will be strengthened and encouraged to engage in every other obstacle that stands in the way of our personal holiness.

And that led us to verses 3 and 4, which further elaborated on the need and desire for the purposeful restraint of the tongue. We saw James in the two illustrations, there, giving examples of just what can be done with something as small as the tongue. Similar to how a bit can move a horse in the direction it needs to go, and a rudder can move a massive ship in the

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direction that it needs to go, so, too, does the tongue move the person in the direction that we are supposed to go.

As we looked at these verses, we talked about the fact that we are not to see our tongues merely as something that could destroy our lives and cause irreparable harm at any time, but rather we were reminded of God's good purpose in giving us the gift of speech, in giving us words, giving us the ability to communicate, that even though it is true that a ship with a broken rudder or with no one at the helm to move the rudder where it needs to go would indeed mean a great danger of certain oncoming disaster, though that is true, a competent pilot ably controlling that rudder turns the ship into something that is not only not a hindrance, but a huge blessing and a help. It actually is a gift. It multiplies to an incredible degree the effectiveness and efficiency of our work, of our mission, aiding us in our purpose.

So we see that we are much better off for having a tongue for the purposes of God than if we were unable to communicate. God, in fact, gave us the gift of communication with words as a

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powerful tool for the purpose of growth of his church and for his own glory. Our tongues are weapons given to us by God for the fulfillment of the Great Commission. And just like the purpose of a sword isn't merely to just not hurt yourself with it, but to use it for good purposes in the battle, so, too, the point of our tongues isn't just to not use them wrongly, but to use them well, to use them skillfully, as a trained soldier for the spiritual battle that God has placed us in. God has given us words for our good and for his glory. It is our job, then, to use a tongue that, along with the rest of our bodies, has been regenerated, now, to a new life and a godly purpose, to bridle it and use it for the good purposes for which God created our tongue and our ability to communicate with words.

So we ended last week with the summary or transition phrase in the beginning of verse 5, which reminds us of the truth of this small member, our tongue, that even though it is small, it is able to boast of great things. The tongue is able to claim a power, a responsibility that is totally disproportionate to its size, and therefore it can be a great benefit for us. But because of that same principle of disproportionate power available to it, it also has the power to do great and severe

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damage: damage to others, damage to ourselves, to our own testimonies, and even to the church of the living God. And that's where James takes us now.

So before we get into that, though, let's remind ourselves of the entirety of this passage one more time. Let's look at verses 1-12 of chapter 3 together, so we have that whole thing in our minds. "Do not many of you become teachers, my brothers, knowing that we will receive a stricter judgment, 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 entire body as well. Now if we put the bits into the horse's mouth so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. And look at the ships also. Though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, they are still directed by a very small rudder, wherever the inclination of the pilot wills. So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things.

"Behold, how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire, and the tongue is a fire, the very world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members as that

which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our existence, and is set on fire by hell. For every kind of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no one can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a fountain pour forth from the same opening fresh and bitter water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, produce olives or a vine produced figs, or can saltwater produce fresh?"

So you can see as we read through this section that there is a bit of a shift in verse 5. In verse 5, it splits. There should probably be two verses, there, but it's split there as James closes the first section by restating the point about the power of the tongue at the beginning of verse 5. Then at the end of verse 5, he offers a new illustration to show us the horrible consequences of failing to bridle the tongue, failing to be obedient to what we've just been implored to do through our study of that passage last week.

So today we're going to talk about the immense potential for danger that exists if we do not take bridling our tongue with absolute seriousness, and we're going to see that in two points: point number 1, the tongue's potential for destruction, the tongue's potential for destruction; and point 2, the tongue's propensity for duplicity, the tongue's propensity for duplicity. Point 1, the tongue's potential for destruction, and we see this point beginning at the very end of verse 5, continuing on through verse 8. "Behold, how great a forest is set a flame by such a small fire, and the tongue is a fire, the very world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body and sets on fire the course of our existence, and is set on fire by hell."

So James first calls our attention to this danger through the word, "Behold." "Behold." He calls out to us. He wants us to pay attention, now, to this new terrifying reality as we are coming out of those last two illustrations. He has just shown how this small part of the body boasts of disproportional power, a bit controlling a large horse, a rudder controlling a giant ship. And now we see that great power in a small member, but going in the other direction, when it's not controlled. So it

can be used for great good, but also for great destruction. So after he's referred, again, to the smallness of the tongue, he then references a small fire for comparison and says, "How great a forest can be set aflame," entirely destroyed, every part affected by what just began as a small little fire.

And that's not a difficult concept for us to understand here in Colorado, an easy illustration to get, as it was for them. A couple of weeks ago, my family drove up the Poudre Canyon. We were reminded of the unbelievable and really sad destruction that's taken place, there, because of the Cameron Peak fire that took place in the late summer, early fall of 2020. I'm sure you all remember this if you lived here at the time. They still don't know for sure how the fire started, but investigators are pretty sure it was from some kind of human activity. So at some point, probably the morning of August 13, 2020, some person ignited something, maybe a match to start a campfire, maybe a cigarette. They didn't quite get the fire that they had going put all the way out, and a little hot ember blew over to the wrong place.

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Whatever it was, it began with just the smallest little flame, smallest little ember, something that was so small at one time that someone could just put it out by closing their fingers on it or throwing a cup of water on it. Something that started so small, in a tiny little moment of time, ended up burning 208,663 acres of Colorado, and it wasn't officially declared to be 100% contained until 112 days later. I'm sure if you remember at that time, because we were all trapped in our houses, if you remember, it was so large at one point that the smoke blocked the view, our view in Greeley, of the sun for many days. Maybe you remember the ash from the fire would cover our yards and patio furniture for days on end. We would send our kids out to play on the trampoline, and they'd come back blackened and covered in ash, ruined clothes. An area that is larger than the city limits of Austin, Texas, turned into black char. Over 20,000 people had to be evacuated. Over 2,000,000 acres of land in Colorado had to be closed off from the public; 469 structures were destroyed; incalculable hundreds of millions of dollars in property damage. And then another \$134 million was spent just to fight the fire. All of that caused by something that began with just a spark, just a flame so small that a child could have put it out at one point.

James uses this illustration not only because of the destructive power of fire, but primarily because of its ability to spread even from the smallest flame. So even though water can be aggressively destructive and we can have floods, a small amount of water is of no real danger. You know, security doesn't see your kids coming in with water bottles, and they're like, "Whoa, careful with that." If a cup of water gets knocked over, none of us is in any real danger. It's probably already happened in here this morning. But if a lit match gets dropped, we react quickly, as we should, because we understand the difference in the danger.

The understanding of a small fire being the beginning of major destruction is an example of a biblical illustration that both we and the original audience are both very familiar with. The point is an easy one to understand. When we hear James say, "And the tongue is a fire," we know what he's referring to. Just one comment we make, just five seconds of unguarded speech is enough to do damage that will continue to have effects for days, months, years, even able to multiply the damage in such a way that that damage from your comments can outlive you. Words, sentences can set a marriage, set a family, a company, a church

in a different direction, doing damage and harm to more people than even might have heard the comment in the first place. Think of the tremendous damage done to children, grandchildren, great grandchildren as the result of one parent finally, one day, audibly voicing the phrase, "I want a divorce." Kids might not have ever heard it, but the fact that one parent made that decision to move from thinking about it to actually uttering it sets a direction for that family that has generational, lasting effects.

The understanding of the tongue as a fire would have been familiar to James' audience, as this is not the first place we see it in scripture. It shows up in a few places—in Proverbs, for example. Proverbs 16:27: "A vile man digs up evil, and the words on his lips are like scorching fire." Proverbs 26:20-21: "With no wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisper, strife quiets down. Like charcoal to hot embers, and wood to fire, so is a contentious man to kindle strife." So it's a familiar phrase, familiar understanding, a familiar word picture that readers of the Bible are all familiar with.

But James actually goes harder, goes stronger in this warning about the tongue in this verse, in verse 6, than anywhere else. Almost every commentator I read pointed out that the language in verse 6 is about as strong as could be given, some even saying comments along the lines of, "This verse is the strongest warning about the destructive power of speech contained anywhere." Verse 6, and it just so happens that there are a fair amount of difficulties in translating the very unique phrases found in this verse. In fact, if you look it up in different translations, verse 6 of James 3, you're going to see probably a greater variety of subtle little differences from translation to translation than you will see in almost any other single verse. Fortunately though, even with all of the different translation decisions that need to be made, it doesn't really affect the main point of the text in any significant way. So whatever translation you've got, you're fine.

One of the biggest issues, though, has to do with the punctuation and how these phrases are connected to each other, the phrases in verse 6. In particular, of great importance is how closely connected is the phrase "the world of unrighteousness" or "the very world of unrighteousness" with

"set among our members." So the LSB that I've got in front of me demonstrates that essentially the phrases are somewhat connected as they're separated by a semicolon instead of with a period like the ESV has. So I think this is better in the LSB. But as I was studying this passage, what seemed to make the most sense is the even stronger connection between the two phrases that you would see in a translation like the CSB.

Again, not that it makes a lot of difference; the point is essentially the same. But when you read the phrase more like this, more like "the tongue is a world of unrighteousness placed among our members," then the following three phrases kind of flow out of it in an easy way, almost like sub-points. But no matter which translation we use, we can still come to the conclusion that the tongue is defined, here, as "a world of unrighteousness" or "the very world of unrighteousness," and that this world of unrighteousness is, in fact, set among our members, or part of our body. It's placed in our body, a world of unrighteousness placed within us.

So what does James mean when he says that “the tongue is the very world of unrighteousness”? Well, the word for world, *kosmos*, is generally used to refer to the world as in that which is in opposition to God, like how we would say that something is “worldly.” This is how Paul always uses the word, and how James has used it in 1:27, where he tells us that part of “pure and undefiled religion is to keep oneself unstained by the world.” In 2:5 he uses the word again. It's not quite as strongly negative there, but it is still easy to see that as he talks about the poor of this world, he is talking about this sinful, fallen world, which is in contrast to the kingdom that he brings up the end of the verse. He also uses it twice in chapter 4, verse 4, again showing that friendship with the world is in direct opposition to following Christ. He says in that verse, “You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world sets himself as an enemy of God.”

So the sinful, rebellious system of the world, that which is the enemy of God, is right there in your mouth. Again, very hard to emphasize just how serious James is being, here, with this phrase. When it says that this very world of

unrighteousness is set among our members, set among our body, he's trying to give us the image of an enemy spy that has infiltrated your body, just waiting to sabotage everything about you from that spy's now new position on the inside. That's the type of warning that James is giving us, here. The wicked world that is hostile toward God has set up for itself an outpost behind enemy lines, and it's in your mouth, the very world of unrighteousness set among our members, an agent of the enemy working to sabotage us and keep us from our mission and actually attack our God from its position.

And we see this, we understand this to be the case in three ways, three phrases in verse 6. So first, you see in verse 6 that it says it "defiles the entire body." It defiles the entire body. So you could use that as a sub-point if you want. "It defiles the entire body." It could also be translated as "stains" or "pollutes." The idea is that it does lasting damage, or damage that lingers, damage that lingers on or continues to be noticed. Once a word goes out from your mouth, it can never be taken back. The damage is done. Like when you fire a bullet: You might regret the damage that happens, but you can't take it back.

There's a real staining aspect to our speech, even though we know—and praise God for this—that every sinful word that we've ever said or ever will say, if we are in Christ, it has been paid in full. We will never have to face the wrath of God for it, no matter how careless it was, no matter how much damage it might have done: forgiven in Christ forever. We can be thankful for that. But that's not what James is talking about. He's not talking about stains on the robes of righteousness that Christ has put on us. But just because that's the case, that doesn't mean that these words won't still have a lasting effect in this life, that it hasn't done damage that in some ways may never be repaired in this life, that some measure of hurt or pain as a result of your words may persist for longer than you could have ever imagined.

As an illustration of this, growing up, one of my first jobs was working with my dad in his carpet-cleaning business. But I do remember a time, and this happened a few times, but maybe the first time I was cleaning the carpets in a room. They're really cleaning up well, there. There's all kinds of spots. I'm just stunned. I'm surprised it's coming out. But

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there were a couple of places I just couldn't get clean. I put more chemical on it like my dad showed me, and then I'd agitate it with my with my foot to try to get it worked in there really well, go over it again and again. It's just not doing anything. And I had my dad come in and take a look at it, and he told me that there's nothing you can do about it because it's not actually a spot from a spill. It's a place where the carpet has been burned. And over the years working with him, I would find all kinds of places like that, and it would always be such a shame because we would leave, and the carpets would be clean and they look great otherwise; but because someone at one point in time made the decision usually to smoke in their house, dropped a cigarette, or sometimes placed a hot iron on the carpet or maybe set their curling iron down for just a second, because of that, there is always going to be a mark, always going to be a mark, a burn mark.

In a similar way, the tongue has the power to stain like a burn mark that can never go away. Unfortunately, most of us know this from experience. And again, it's not that we're not supposed to forgive sins against us, spoken or otherwise, to do our best to never remember them again, every time they pop up to

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try and put them out immediately. And yet, so often it is true that when we are in the middle of fighting against another sin in our life, fighting against discouragement, or maybe we need to forgive someone again, or maybe we're seeking the forgiveness of someone that we've had to seek forgiveness from before, and these words come into our mind again or come into their mind again. Even though we've totally forgiven them, even though they've been totally forgiven and completely forgiven in Christ, everything so clean, God in Christ has totally forgiven us, totally forgiven them, and we rejoice in that. But in this life, as we still live with the taint of sin, we still notice that burn mark, there. It's not good, it's not okay. We should fight with everything in us to forgive and to see our brothers and sisters in Christ only adorned in the righteousness of Christ.

But the fact that we know that we still struggle with this sometimes is not only the reminder that others are forcing themselves to do this with us as well, but it should also encourage us to be extra careful with our words, to heed this warning, to take it very seriously. One sinful comment, one angry tirade, one foolish moment of passing along gossip, an unguarded conversation, airing your complaints about your

spouse, a family member, a church member, or the church in general—while those things can and will be absolutely and fully forgiven through the gospel of Jesus Christ for those who are truly his, even though that might be the case, lasting damage to Christ, his church, others, yourself can still happen. It might be a clean burn mark, but it is a burn mark nonetheless.

There's certainly a connection here between this verse and 1:27: "Pure and undefiled religion before our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world." That sinful world system, the one that opposes our God, finds for itself an ally in your tongue, in your unguarded speech, in your hastily sent text message, in your angry social media comment, in your e-mail response that you didn't pray through before you hit "Send." The very world of unrighteousness that is hostile toward God, defiles a family, pollutes a church, permanently stains a soul—the world has done this by finding an ally for itself in your mouth, in the words that have come out of you.

I'm thinking back, then, to what we talked about last week on the discipline of bridling your tongue and disciplining it to be used as an instrument of good; and how sanctification in this area will lead to sanctification in other areas of your life. You can see that one of the best ways to keep yourself, then, from being unstained by the world, not just when it comes to your speech, but in all of life, is to work to be careful and disciplined with the words that you use. So putting this back into the context of last week, how do we keep ourselves from being unstained by the world? Well, a good way to start is disciplining your speech.

Secondly, a second sub-point if you will, or a second phrase that we see here, our tongue is a world of unrighteousness, is found in this next phrase in verse 6. It sets on fire the course of our existence; it sets on fire the course of our existence. This is another kind of odd phrase to translate, a really odd phrase to translate. It literally means—it's only here in the New Testament—but it literally means "setting on fire the wheel of origin" or "setting on fire the circle of life." But we can't translate it that way because of the song that just popped into all your heads, right, when I

said that. All right, get through that first line in your heads. All right, you back with me? Okay.

But the phrase is supposed to communicate more than just your life, personally. There's a reason he uses that phrase instead of just saying "life." It has to do with your entire existence, the totality of your life as it pertains to your life, and all that your life affects: the people you come in contact with, and who you influence, and whom you have influence upon. The idea, here, is that you are known primarily through what you say. Yes, your actions and the way that you are observed in the things that you do, the things that you are a part of, yes, those play into it. But all that you do is interpreted by others through your speech, through what they hear you say, through the words you use. What you communicate is important to how you are perceived by others. You are known for your words, what you say, how often you speak, what you talk about, what you are passionate about in your speech, what you excuse, what you defend, whom you condemn, whom you lift up, how many words you give to a particular subject. That reveals something; that paints a picture to others of who you are.

These things paint a picture of who you are to others. Whether you want to agree with that picture or not, that's what's going on. If you are perceived to be a gossip, if you're perceived to be a complainer, a grumbler, ungrateful, angry, there could be some miscommunication, but it's probably mostly on you, as a result of people getting to know you better primarily through your words. You might not like it, and other factors, yes, may play a part, but if more than one person thinks a similar thing about you, it generally is a result of what you've been communicating to them through your words. This is who you are to others, and each of you knows this to be the case because this is what you do to others. That's what we do.

You know, the most obvious example would be if you're interviewing someone for a job. It really is only your initial conversation with them, only in that conversation do you come to judgments about who that person is, based mainly on specifically chosen words that they want to present to you, a specific part of them, how they want you to perceive them, what they choose in that moment to describe themselves as. But over time, as you have more conversations with that person, as you hear them talking to others, you develop a more accurate picture of who

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they really are as they fill in the gaps with less carefully chosen words. This is the way that you are with people, and so you shouldn't be surprised that this is the way that everyone else is with you.

Sometimes, again, we might be bothered that someone thinks of us in a certain way that we think is unfair or that we wish they didn't think of us in. And maybe that's true if they're the only person and they don't know you very well. I'm willing to give a little bit, here. Maybe they have only been privy to a few interactions with you, and if they were around you a little more, they'd reach different conclusions. Maybe they've misunderstood some things, but generally, generally, the picture that has formed in someone's mind about who you are is a picture that has been created by you, by your actions, and primarily through your words.

So when we are talking about the effect of words on the course of our existence or throughout our lives, we are talking about this. But again James again casts this phrase here, once again in the realm of setting on fire. It sets on fire the

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course of our existence, reminding us again of the untold damage that can be done as we go through our lives carelessly throwing out words: the little fire that I can set over here in a situation where I lose my temper; and that little fire set over in another situation, where I start complaining about how something is done; the little fire I set when I give in to some gossip, when I join someone in slander, like throwing matches everywhere.

This picture from verse 5 is now put in the context of the entirety of our lives and the unbelievable amount of opportunities we have to just, again, throw lit matches all over the place with our speech. Sometimes you might notice them in time to limit the damage. Other times other Christian brothers or sisters might step in and limit the damage for you. Then there are other times where you don't notice or you don't care, and it can go on to set all kinds of things in motion in the life of someone else, a raging fire that you might not ever find out was even started by you. There's a chance those people who started the Cameron Peak fire don't even know they did it. But if you're a parent—this is tough for me—doesn't that scare you to death a bit? From an earthly perspective, what will have the

most formative effect on how your children turn out will be your word choices.

Again, you see James, here, intentionally using shocking-sounding language within the incredible, again, very unique wording in this verse to get our attention, to flash as kind of a bright warning sign in our faces, as he can warn us as best as he can to keep us from getting complacent and failing to take our tongues seriously. And it is from this place that he makes a third shocking statement on the way our tongue is a world of unrighteousness as he identifies the source. So third, the tongue is set on fire by Hell. You see that again in verse 6 at the end: "and is set on fire by hell." If it wasn't bad enough that the hostile, worldly system finds for itself an ally in our tongue, using it to do its work of staining and defiling and setting fires everywhere as we go through the course of our life, if that wasn't bad enough, here we see that the source of the fires being set by our tongues is Hell itself.

The term James uses here for Hell, the term "Gehenna," this is the only place outside of the gospels that it's used. This

term directly refers to the valley of Hinnom outside of Jerusalem, where trash and filth and dead bodies of animals and people were burned. And it has a whole history of Molech-worship that we don't have time to go into. But because that fire was always burning there, Jesus used this term to refer to the place of eternal punishment, the unquenchable fire. It is a place that's been prepared for the punishment of Satan and his demons. It's not the place that he rules over, like cartoons seem to show. It is the place of torment for him, and so it's generally accepted that this term is supposed to be representative for him when it's used this way.

At the very least, it's the demonstration that the character of the tongue that we see identified here is the character of the one who belongs in Hell. Destructive, defiling speech, slander, gossip, grumbling, complaining, swearing—it's not just your tongue slipping. That is the character of the speech of those who belong in Hell. It's speech that is allied with Satan himself. So not only is this speech the very world of unrighteousness that is hostile to God, it's pro-Satan speech. So it should sting quite a bit and be a strong-enough correction and motivation to hear that our tongues, our conversations are

not serving the purposes of God as they ought to. But how much more so to come to the realization that an unbridled, undisciplined tongue serves Satan.

Well, after that, after verse 6, after using this verse to kind of shake us into attention, James moves into another illustration in verses 7 and 8 to further drive home the point of the danger of the tongue. And the illustrations in the rest of this passage are fill-in points that are pretty easy, so we won't spend as much time on them. But look at verses 7 and 8 again: "For every kind of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison." Here again, this point is obvious, right? Unlike every form of beast, the tongue cannot be tamed by mankind. And "tamed," here, means the same thing as controlled or subdued. So don't waste a bunch of time like I used to do as a kid trying to think of different types of animals, bugs, reptiles, fish that can't be tamed, like moths right now, just walking around thinking of that. Those aren't tamed.

That's not what's going on. What James is doing, here, is using categories similar to those that are given in Genesis 1:26-30, where God tells mankind, represented there by Adam and Eve, that creation has been given to them and that they are to have dominion over every beast of the earth, bird of the sky, and fish of the sea. And we know that throughout history, we have come to understand this to be the case. Mankind rules this planet. Mankind has subdued the animal kingdom and has total dominion over it. But even though mankind has tamed every beast and placed it in subjection, the tongue has never been tamed. The tongue has never been tamed. And this isn't in contrast to what James has said about "bridling the tongue." That's still an expectation that is placed upon each of us. The picture of bridling is different than the picture of taming. You can see that, right? So bridling is a forced submission through a means, a bit and a bridle, rather than taming or subduing based on your own power.

But the picture, here, is of the overall success of mankind in this endeavor. So animals are not running rampant, destroying societies, but tongues are. That's the picture. And the term for mankind, *anthropon*, is also there in verse 8, but it remains

untranslated in most translations because they expect you to see it kind of carrying over from the last verse. But the idea is that no one among mankind can tame the tongue. The tongue cannot be placed under the same subjugation as animals. "It is a restless evil full of deadly poison." Again, we see here even more destructive comparative language. The word for "restless" is one that can also be translated as "unstable," like it is in chapter 1. But in this context, "restless" really makes sense because it is bringing to mind the picture of an animal that just cannot be wrestled into submission, that won't stop moving long enough to be restrained. "Filled with deadly poison," again, keeping with the animal metaphor, but again reminding us in this metaphor also of the destructive power of the tongue. Not only can it not be restrained, but it's extra dangerous because it's full of deadly poison that can't be restrained. Again, it's not just that it needs to be restrained for the sake of restraining it. It needs to be restrained because it destroys. Mankind is able to tame and subdue every animal, but is hopeless against the tongue.

However, something that is inferred, here, though not explicitly taught, but by affirming the truth that no one among

mankind can tame the tongue, we are reminded that Someone outside of mankind can. The ESV tries to push us to this point by translating this verse as "no human being can tame the tongue." But again, this is an implied point. It's not directly taught in the language James uses. So the LSB is more accurate, here. But it does remind us, doesn't it, of the great truth that Travis closed the end of last week's service with. You can't come out of the text like this, which is incredibly convicting, with the only application being, "Whew! I need to try harder. I need to try harder." It's not going to work. Our only hope for bridling our tongues, for disciplining our speech for the service of our King is through a type of striving that is empowered by his Holy Spirit and motivated through the reflection on and thankfulness for the gospel in a Christian. And James does expect us to do this. He does expect us to repent and respond as we come to conviction through these verses.

And we will see this a little as we come into our second point, which is a concluding point: the tongue's propensity for duplicity. The tongue's propensity for duplicity. We see this in the truth of a certain reality which James mentions and then backs up with just another smattering of illustrations in verses

9-11. "With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men who have been made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a fountain pour forth from the same opening fresh and bitter water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can saltwater produce fresh."

Again, James, here, this whole section and the illustrations that he uses refer once again to a concept that he's built off of throughout the book: the concept of being a double-minded person, how bad that is. This concept has in one way or another been a type of theme running throughout everything we've looked at so far. The one who prays for wisdom but doubts: He's double-minded. The one who is in a time of trial but blames God for the temptation: He's double-minded. The one who's a hearer of the Word and not a doer of the Word; the one who claims to hold to a faith in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ while also holding to an attitude of personal favoritism; the one who claims to have faith, but has no works: These are all examples of double-mindedness. This is the concept, that claiming to be one who has repented of his sin and placed his

trust in the gospel of Jesus Christ, the one who really understands what has been done for him in the gospel, the mercy, the grace, the love that has been poured out on him will necessarily act and live in a certain way that is consistent with that gospel, and that to do otherwise indicates that you don't actually understand or believe what you claim to understand and believe.

And here we see James making the case for recognizing and repenting of double-mindedness when it comes to our speech, and he does it with so much loving concern for God and for his readers. It's a concern that matches the seriousness with which he has spoken of on this topic up until this point. You can hear it in him. "With it we bless our Lord and Father. With it we curse men who have been made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so." When we use our mouths the way that we have used them this morning already, singing praises to God, how awful is it that we can then turn around, maybe even later today, maybe even in the foyer, use those same mouths to rebel against him as we speak against those who are made in his image.

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I couldn't think of a stronger way to make this point, so just think through this with me, some of the things that we have proclaimed to God this morning in the words that we have already sung. So we started out extolling God for his attributes, giving him our adoration, singing the mighty power of God, the powerful Creator of the universe that made the mountains rise, that stretched out the skies and the seas, whose wisdom ordained the sun, the stars and the moon, put them in their places, gave them their purposes, who filled the earth with food and everything in it for our enjoyment, for his glory, the omnipresent God who is everywhere. We sang that, and we sang our praises to God, whose grace has reached for us, who pulled us from the raging sea and set us safe on solid ground, the one who causes us not to fear when darkness falls because he is the one who strengthens us, the one whom our hope is hidden in, who brings each promise from his word to pass, the one whose grace renews our days in times of loss and weakness. Who is like the Lord our God, strong to save, faithful in love, the one who has paid our debt and in whom our victory is won? We sang that with our mouths.

We sang a song, also, of praise, adoring Christ because there is nothing in us worth boasting in. It is not us, but

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Christ in us, in which we can boast endlessly. He is our gift of grace, so great a gift that there is nothing more for heaven now to give. Our joy, our righteousness, our freedom, steadfast love, and boundless peace are found in him. He is our only hope. Our lives are wholly bound to his. Even in dark nights we are not forsaken; our Savior stays by our side. We labor on in weakness, and we do it while rejoicing because his power is displayed in our need. He is our Good Shepherd, who will defend us and lead us through the deepest and darkest valley. No fate do we now dread because we know we are forgiven. Our future is sure, the price paid. Jesus suffered and bled to secure our pardon and was raised to overthrow the grave for us. Sin has been defeated. Our chains have been released. We are free to follow him, and we are certain that he will renew us day by day until he brings us home, our race being complete, and we stand before his throne.

We proclaimed that with our mouths, and then just before the sermon, we used our mouths once again to ask God through song to breathe new life into us through his Spirit, to renew us with the presence of the risen Lord, to cause the Word to come alive in us, to give us faith for what we can't see, to give us

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passion for his purity. We asked him to come, abide with us that his joy might be seen in us, that we might love enough to cover every sin and that that might be displayed in our actions, to be kind to the greatest and the least, that Christ would be shown through our lives in all we say and do. We asked him to cause his church, us, to hunger for his ways, that our prayers would rise to him as a fragrance, that in our unity the face of Christ would be clear for the world to see. And in just a moment, we're going to sing again. We're going to ask him to help us love what he loves and do what he does, that our will would be one with his, reflected in what we do and how we endure. And we're going to end that song by praising him for the promise that we will never die but live for eternity.

These are the words that came out of our mouths in praise today, representatives of the things that we sing regularly and proclaim often to one another and pray, words that come from our prayers. And this is James' point: It's with these same mouths that proclaim these unbelievable truths, joyously, that we maybe even within the hour will slander, disparage, gossip about, complain about, yell at, put down, whether they're in front of us or not, one who is made in the image of the same God that we

just sung all those marvelous truths about. How can the same mouths that confess these wonderful truths together—and again, this is just a sample of the glorious things that we proclaim about our God often—how can these same mouths do something as disgustingly duplicitous as uttering sinful speech, complaining about this God or about those who bear his image?

“Brothers and sisters, these things ought not to be so. Does a fountain pour forth from the same opening fresh and bitter water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can saltwater produce fresh.” James ends this section pointing out the utter inconsistency, the horrible duplicity inherent in this practice; and he is doing it in such a loving way, brother pleading with brothers. He throws himself into this: “How can we?” He uses that familial term “brothers” two times in these verses. Notice that he's not commanding, here. There's no imperative. He's pleading with those who are in Christ to think and reason like Christians. How terrible is this that this happens. He's desperate that this cannot mark the one who is connected to the true vine, this type of speech. This cannot mark the one whose identity is the One who is the spring of living water.

This is not the call to try to turn off the faucet with the bitter water and turn on the faucet with the fresh water. This is James imploring us to be, as Christians, who we truly are, similar to what Jesus said in Luke 6:43-45: "There's no good tree which produces bad fruit, nor, on the other hand, a bad tree which produces good fruit. For each tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they pick grapes from a bramble bush. The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good. The evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil. For his mouth speaks from the abundance of his heart."

Are the words of the songs that we sing, the song that we're about to sing, are they true expressions of your heart? Are they? If so, praise God, and let's together then heed the words of warning from this text today, a way to be a doer of the Word and not a hearer only, and guard against the world of unrighteousness and potential satanic destruction that is everywhere, always, at least in potential present with you. Guard against it, and through the strength of the Spirit, that same strength that we sang about earlier today, do everything

that it takes, inviting in discipleship, accountability, maybe cutting yourself off totally from certain influences if you need to—whatever it takes to bridle your tongue so that it might be used in the way that God has intended it, so that out of the mouths that praise our Lord and Father might also come only words that encourage and heal and restore the ones that he has made in his image. Let's pray.

God, as we come to this section of scripture, it is again strong language, a strong warning, but it's given to us with such love and concern for our good. We don't just do these things because we know we should, but it's appealing to us based on the fact that we love you, and we long to live in obedience and please the God who with great mercy, love, and grace saved us. Father, I pray that in response to this teaching, our church would grow in its longing to be concerned and careful about the way that we talk to one another and to others; again, that you would set a guard over the doors of our lips. That it would be the prayer of all of us that we'd be diligent, that we would be careful to do this, not because of any type of fear that we need to obey, but because we want to love as you loved us, and because the words that we sing up here, the words that we are

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about to sing, are true expressions of hearts that have been regenerated to hate sin and love a new master. And it's in his name we pray. Amen.