When Faith Becomes a Way of Life

A Pastoral Journey Through the Epistle of James

Volume 3

Randy Nielsen

Dedication

To my loving wife, Marilyn,
who has always stood by me through good times and bad;
who is always seeking to know more about God and His Word;
and whose own desire to understand Scripture has encouraged me along the way.
I dedicate this book to her with love and gratitude,
and with the hope that this commentary may help her—and perhaps others as well—to better understand God's Word and to draw closer to the One who gave it to us.

About the Author

Randy Nielsen began life as a sickly child. His mother prayed that if God would allow her son to survive, she would see that he received a proper Christian education. She kept that promise, making certain that Randy was in church nearly every Sunday and, as he grew, encouraging him to remain close to God.

Later in life, Randy felt God calling him into ministry—a calling he initially resisted. But, as Randy has sometimes observed, God does not take "No" particularly well.

In 2007, Randy finally answered that call. He entered the United Methodist Church's Local Pastor licensing program and became a Licensed Local Pastor. Over the next fifteen years, he served several church appointments, sharing the Gospel, caring for congregations, and helping some of the churches he served experience renewed growth.

During his years in ministry, Randy pursued graduate theological education at Asbury Theological Seminary, completing 54 credit hours toward the 96-hour Master of Divinity degree through online study. Ultimately, he decided that the time and financial commitment required to complete the degree were no longer practical. Content to serve as a vessel for God's Word as a Licensed Local Pastor, Randy continued ministering to the churches entrusted to his care.

Randy retired from pastoral ministry in 2022, but not from his love of Scripture or his desire to understand God's Word more deeply. That continuing journey eventually became ***When Faith Becomes a Way of Life****: A Pastoral Journey Through the Epistle of James*.

Today, Randy and his family regularly attend a Southern Baptist church, where he continues his lifelong journey of faith, study, and discipleship.

A Note from the Author

This book grew out of a journey through the Epistle of James that began simply—with a desire to slow down and listen carefully to what James was saying.

Along the way, that study became something more.

In preparing *When Faith Becomes a Way of Life*, I made extensive use of ChatGPT, an artificial intelligence system developed by OpenAI, which I came to call "Atlas." Atlas served as a research, writing, and editorial partner throughout the project. Our work together included exploring the historical and literary context of James, examining Greek words and phrases, developing and testing interpretations, organizing the commentary, and refining the pastoral reflections found throughout these pages.

I believe it is important to acknowledge that contribution openly.

At the same time, the theological judgments, interpretations, editorial decisions, and final form of this work are my own. I reviewed, questioned, revised, accepted, or rejected the material developed through those conversations, just as I would material gathered through other research and study resources.

Artificial intelligence did not replace the study of Scripture. It became one of the tools used in that study.

Just as importantly, our purpose was never to turn these pages into an academic exercise or to give the reader the equivalent of a graduate degree in biblical studies. There are excellent scholarly works written for that purpose, and I am grateful for them.

Our purpose here is different.
We want to help people understand Scripture.
That is one reason these pages sometimes read more like a conversation than a traditional commentary. The shorter paragraphs, pauses, repeated phrases, and occasional sentences standing alone are intentional. They reflect the way we might talk

about a passage if we were sitting together with an open Bible, stopping occasionally to say:
“Look at this.”
“Did you notice that?”
“Why would James say it that way?”
“And what might that mean for us?”
The scholarship still matters. Historical context matters. Language matters. Theology matters. Interpretive differences matter. We have tried to take all of those things seriously.
But the scholarship should serve the reader rather than become an obstacle between the reader and the text.
Perhaps the best description of the process is simply this:
There were many occasions when it felt less like a person asking questions of a computer and more like two people standing at a whiteboard, opening the Scriptures together and asking:
“What is Scripture really trying to tell us here?”
That is the experience I hope these pages provide for you as well.
Not simply reading an explanation of Scripture.
But joining the conversation.
Opening the Bible with us.
Stopping where something deserves another look.
Asking questions when something is difficult.
And occasionally sitting quietly with a truth before moving on.
Because ultimately the purpose of studying Scripture is not simply to know more about the Bible.
It is to hear what God is saying through it—
and then to ask what we will do with what we have heard.

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version (KJV).

James 3:1–5 — The Power of the Tongue 6
James 3:1 — Teachers and Greater Accountability 15
James 3:2 — Stumbling in Speech 22
James 3:3 — The Bit and the Horse 30
James 3:4 — The Helm and the Ship 37
James 3:5 — A Little Member and a Little Fire 45
James 3:6–12 — The Untamable Tongue 54
James 3:6 — The Tongue Is a Fire 64
James 3:7 — Taming Living Creatures 71
James 3:8 — The Tongue Can No Man Tame 76
James 3:9 — Blessing God and Cursing People 84
James 3:10 — Blessing and Cursing from the Same Mouth 91
James 3:11 — Sweet Water and Bitter 99
James 3:12 — The Fig Tree and Its Fruit 108
James 3:13–18 — The Wisdom from Above 117
James 3:13 — Wisdom Made Visible 129
James 3:14 — Envy and Strife in the Heart 138
James 3:15 — Wisdom That Descends From Below 148
James 3:16 — The Fruit of Envy and Strife 157
James 3:17 — The Wisdom from Above 167
James 3:18 — The Fruit of Righteousness 178

A Commentary on the Epistle of James

James 3:1–5 — The Power of the Tongue

“My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation. For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body. Behold, we put bits in the horses’ mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body. Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth. Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!”
— James 3:1–5, KJV

James has just finished one of the strongest arguments in his letter:
Faith that does not become visible in the way we live is dead.
Abraham's faith acted.
Rahab's faith acted.
Living faith does something.
As Chapter 3 begins, James does not abandon that argument. Instead, he turns our attention toward another place where faith becomes visible—or perhaps more appropriately, **audible**.
Our speech.
What we say matters.
How we say it matters.
What our words do to another person matters.
And James begins this discussion with a warning directed toward those whose calling places words at the very center of what they do:
teachers.
“My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.”
Those are sobering words.
Anyone who has ever stood before a congregation and attempted to explain the Word of God should feel something of their weight.
James does.
Notice that he does not say:
“Those who teach…”
He says:
“we who teach.”
James places himself beneath the warning.

He does not stand above other teachers and caution them about their responsibility. He acknowledges that the same responsibility rests upon him.
That little word **"we"** tells us something important about faithful Christian teaching.
The teacher never graduates beyond the Word being taught.
The preacher is never exempt from the sermon being preached.
The pastor does not stand outside Scripture and explain what everyone else ought to do.
The teacher stands beneath the Word alongside those being taught.

1. The Responsibility of Teaching

Why would James begin a discussion about the tongue with teachers?
Because teachers exercise much of their influence through **words**.
A teacher can explain.
Encourage.
Correct.
Comfort.
Challenge.
Guide.
But words possess another possibility.
A teacher can confuse.
Mislead.
Discourage.
Manipulate.
Condemn.
Or present a personal opinion as though it were the command of God.
When someone assumes the responsibility of teaching Scripture, that person is doing something extraordinary.
He or she is attempting to tell another human being:
This is what the Word of God means.
There should be a certain trembling in that.
Not terror.
Not a fear so great that no one would dare teach.
But **reverence**.
There ought to remain somewhere within every pastor, preacher, teacher, and writer who handles Scripture the prayer:
Lord, never let me forget whose Word I am handling.
Teaching Scripture is not frightening because God expects teachers to be perfect.
James immediately makes that impossible:
"For in many things we offend all."
Again James includes himself.

All of us.
The teacher.
The congregation.
The mature believer.
The new believer.
James himself.
We stumble.
And James says we stumble **"in many ways."**
The stricter judgment of teachers therefore cannot mean that teachers are required never to make a mistake. If perfection were the qualification for teaching, James himself would have disqualified every teacher with his very next sentence.
The issue is responsibility.
Those whose words influence the faith of others bear responsibility for how that influence is used.
A teacher should therefore approach Scripture with humility, prayer, study, and a willingness to admit:
I may need to understand this better.
Perhaps one of the most dangerous things that can happen to a teacher of Scripture is not making a mistake.
It is becoming so confident in speaking for God that the teacher no longer believes a mistake is possible.

2. "If any man offend not in word…"

James then makes an astonishing statement:
"If any man offend not in word is mature, able also to bridle the whole body."
James has moved from teachers to everyone.
The problem of speech is universal.
And controlling our speech, James says, is an indication of extraordinary spiritual maturity.
That makes sense when we consider how quickly words can escape us.
Many actions require preparation.
We may have time to reconsider.
Words often require almost nothing.
A moment of irritation.
A flash of anger.
An embarrassing situation.
A disagreement.
A sarcastic thought.
And suddenly the words are spoken.
Sometimes we recognize the mistake almost immediately.
I shouldn't have said that.

But spoken words possess an uncomfortable characteristic:
we cannot retrieve them.
We can apologize for them.
We can explain them.
We can ask forgiveness for them.
We can try to repair the damage they caused.
But we cannot make the other person **unhear** them.
That is part of the extraordinary power James is about to describe.

3. The Bit in the Horse's Mouth

James gives us his first illustration:
"Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body."
Consider the disproportion.
A horse may weigh a thousand pounds or more.
It possesses tremendous muscular strength.
Yet a relatively small object placed in its mouth allows a rider to influence the direction of the entire animal.
The bit does not become powerful because of its size.
Its significance comes from its **influence**.
James wants us to see the comparison.
The tongue is a small part of the human body.
Yet something very small can influence the direction of something very large.
A few words can change a conversation.
A few words can change a relationship.
A few words can change someone's understanding of himself.
A few words can change someone's understanding of God.
Words can sometimes even change the direction of a life.
A parent says:
"I'm proud of you."
A teacher says:
"You can do this."
A friend says:
"I'm staying with you through this."
A pastor says:
"God has not abandoned you."
Those are small sentences.
But their influence can be enormous.
Unfortunately, the opposite is also true.
A cruel sentence spoken carelessly can remain in someone's memory long after the speaker has forgotten saying it.
The bit is small.

The horse is large.
James says:
Do not confuse smallness with insignificance.

4. The Rudder of a Ship

James then enlarges the picture.
"Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth."
Now we have a ship.
Large.
Heavy.
Driven by powerful winds.
Surrounded by forces much greater than the person steering it.
And yet its direction can be affected by something relatively small:
the rudder.
The picture adds something to the illustration of the horse.
James introduces **direction**.
Words do not merely affect individual moments.
Words can help determine where things go.
A conversation can move toward reconciliation or hostility.
A disagreement can move toward understanding or resentment.
A marriage can move toward intimacy or distance.
A congregation can move toward unity or division.
And sometimes the movement begins with something remarkably small:
a sentence.
The question is therefore not merely:
What am I saying?
James invites us to ask:
Where are my words taking us?
That is an important question in every relationship.
When I speak to my spouse, where are my words taking our marriage?
When I speak to my children, where are my words taking their understanding of themselves?
When I speak about another person, where are my words taking the listener's opinion of that person?
When I speak during disagreement, are my words moving us toward resolution—or simply helping me win?
When a pastor speaks to a congregation, where are those words leading the people entrusted to that pastor's care?
The rudder is small.
But direction matters.

5. “Even so the tongue is a little member…”

James now tells us explicitly what his illustrations mean:
“Even so the tongue is a little member, yet it boasts of great exploits.”
The tongue is physically small.
Its influence is not.
And James's wording introduces another danger.
The tongue **“boasts.”**
Words do not merely direct others.
Words can become instruments through which we elevate ourselves.
We can make ourselves appear wiser.
More important.
More righteous.
More knowledgeable.
More successful.
More spiritual.
We can even tell stories that are technically true while arranging the details so that we emerge looking particularly impressive.
The tongue is remarkably skilled at constructing the version of ourselves we would like other people to see.
James has already confronted boasting earlier in the letter, and he will confront it again.
For James, genuine faith has little room for self-exaltation.
The tongue may accomplish great things.
But the Christian must always remember where genuine greatness comes from.

6. A Small Fire

Then, near the end of verse 5, James changes the image:
“Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!”
Until now, James's illustrations have been largely neutral.
A bit can guide a horse in the proper direction.
A rudder can guide a ship safely toward its destination.
Likewise, the tongue can be used for tremendous good.
But now the tone changes.
Fire.
A forest fire does not require a forest-sized flame to begin.
It requires a spark.
Something small.
Something that may initially appear insignificant.
But once the fire begins spreading, the size of the original spark no longer matters.
James has brought us to the edge of something darker.
The tongue can guide.

The tongue can direct.
The tongue can accomplish great things.
But the same power that makes words capable of extraordinary good also makes them capable of extraordinary destruction.
And that is where James will take us next.
Verse 5 gives us the spark.
Verse 6 will show us the fire.

The Movement of James

James begins Chapter 3 with a very specific group:
teachers.
Their words carry influence, and influence carries responsibility.
But almost immediately James broadens the circle:
"For in many things we offend all."
The problem is no longer merely the teacher's problem.
It belongs to everyone.
James then moves through three images:
The bit.
Small, but capable of guiding something much larger.
The rudder.
Small, but capable of determining direction even amid powerful forces.
The spark.
Small, but capable of beginning something enormously destructive.
Notice the progression.
James begins with **responsibility**.
Then moves to **influence**.
Then to **direction**.
And finally to **consequence**.
He is steadily removing our ability to dismiss careless speech as:
"They're only words."
For James, there is no such thing as **"only words."**
Words can teach.
Words can guide.
Words can encourage.
Words can wound.
Words can establish direction.
And words can start fires.
The tongue is small.
James's entire argument is that its size tells us almost nothing about its power.

Pastoral Reflection

Most of us can probably remember words spoken to us many years ago.
Some of them still make us smile.

Someone believed in us when we did not believe in ourselves.
Someone encouraged us when we were ready to quit.
Someone told us that we mattered.
Someone reminded us that God had not forgotten us.
Perhaps the person who spoke those words has long since forgotten the conversation.
We have not.
Unfortunately, the opposite can also be true.
A cruel sentence can survive in the memory for decades.
The speaker may have been angry for thirty seconds.
The listener may carry the words for thirty years.
That is why James refuses to treat speech casually.
And perhaps that is also why he begins with teachers.
Those who speak often—and those whose words carry authority—must be especially conscious of the power entrusted to them.
For pastors, this should produce humility.
There is enormous privilege in standing before God's people with an open Bible.
There is also enormous responsibility.
A pastor should never become so accustomed to the pulpit that standing there becomes ordinary.
But James does not allow the congregation to sit comfortably while the pastor receives the warning.
Verse 2 gathers everyone into the room:
"all of us."
We all speak.
We all influence.
We all sometimes direct relationships through the words we choose.
And we all occasionally strike sparks.
The question is not whether our words possess power.
James assumes they do.
The question is:
What are we doing with that power?

Something Worth Pondering

James begins with teachers, but he quickly brings all of us beneath his teaching.
Our words may be small things when measured in syllables and seconds.
Their effects may not be small at all.
So perhaps before we move into the darker warning beginning in verse 6, we should sit for a moment with James's bit, rudder, and spark.

Ask yourself this

Where are my words taking the people around me?
Do they guide toward Christ, reconciliation, courage, truth, and grace—or do they sometimes steer relationships toward resentment, discouragement, division, and anger?
And perhaps most personally:
If someone remembers something I say today thirty years from now, what kind of words do I want them to remember?
The tongue is small.
But James has warned us never to mistake small for unimportant.

A Closer Look

James 3:1 — Teachers and Greater Accountability

“My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.”
— James 3:1, KJV

There are verses in Scripture that a pastor can read rather comfortably.
This is not one of them.

Anyone who has stood before a congregation with an open Bible and attempted to say, **“This is what this passage means,”** should feel the weight of James's words.

James does not begin Chapter 3 by celebrating teachers.
He begins by warning them.

“Be not many masters.”

That may sound strange. The Church needs teachers. Jesus commanded His followers to make disciples and teach them. Paul recognized teaching as a gift within the Church. Surely James is not discouraging faithful people from teaching God's Word.

He is not.

James is confronting something much more dangerous:
the desire to teach without appreciating the responsibility that comes with teaching.

1. “Not Many of You…”

In the early Christian community, teachers occupied an important position.

Most believers did not possess personal copies of Scripture. The Scriptures were heard when they were read and explained within the gathered community. Those who taught therefore exercised considerable influence over how others understood God, Christ, faith, obedience, and the Christian life.

That influence could easily become attractive.
To teach was to be heard.
To teach was to possess a degree of authority.
To teach was to have others listen while you spoke.

James therefore begins with an unusual qualification:
Not everyone should seek that position.

The issue is not intelligence.
It is not education.
It is not eloquence.
It is not whether someone enjoys speaking before others.

The issue is whether the person understands what it means to handle the Word of God before people who may shape their lives according to what they hear.
Teaching Scripture is not simply communicating information.
It is influencing souls.

2. "My brethren…"

James again addresses the community affectionately.
His warning is serious, but it is not hostile.
He is not attempting to frighten faithful teachers away from their calling.
He is trying to make certain that those who teach understand what they are accepting.
There is a difference between being **called to teach** and simply wanting to be **recognized as a teacher**.
One seeks to serve.
The other can easily seek status.
One asks:
"How can I faithfully help these people understand God's Word?"
The other can gradually begin asking:
"What will these people think of me?"
That difference may exist only within the heart, where no congregation can see it.
But God can.
And James is about to remind teachers that the One before whom they ultimately stand is not the congregation.

3. "We Who Teach…"

Perhaps the most important word in this verse is only two letters long: **we.**
James includes himself.
He could have written:
"Those who teach will be judged with greater strictness."
Instead:
"we who teach."
James does not place himself above the warning he gives to others.
He stands beneath it.
That tells us something essential about Christian teaching.
The faithful teacher never stands above Scripture.
The teacher stands beneath Scripture.
The preacher does not proclaim a Word that applies only to the congregation.
The preacher must first hear that Word himself.
The pastor who preaches forgiveness must forgive.
The teacher who teaches humility must pursue humility.

The preacher who calls others to repentance must remain willing to repent.
The person who teaches generosity must examine his own relationship with possessions.
And the person who teaches about controlling the tongue must examine his own words.
There is no special doorway through which the teacher escapes the teaching.
The Word passes through the teacher before it reaches anyone else.
That can be uncomfortable.
Perhaps it should be.

4. "Will Be Judged with Greater Strictness"

Here is the part pastors would sometimes prefer James had phrased differently.
Greater strictness.
James does not explain every detail of what that judgment entails. Nor should we attempt to construct an elaborate doctrine from one sentence.
But his central point is unmistakable:
Greater influence brings greater accountability.
Words spoken casually between friends can matter greatly.
Words spoken while claiming to explain God's Word carry another dimension of responsibility.
A pastor can say:
"The Bible says…"
And people listen differently.
That phrase invokes an authority greater than the speaker.
That is precisely why it must never be used carelessly.
There is an enormous difference between saying:
"This is how I understand the passage,"
and saying:
"God says this, and therefore you must…"
when what follows is actually our preference, tradition, assumption, political opinion, personal prejudice, or theological speculation.
One of the gravest abuses of spiritual authority occurs when someone attaches God's name to something God has not said.
James reminds teachers that God notices the difference.

5. The Pastor's Fear

There is a healthy fear associated with preaching.
Not terror.
Not the constant anxiety that one imperfect sentence will bring condemnation.
James will immediately acknowledge in verse 2:

“in many things we offend all.”
James knows teachers are fallible because James includes himself among them.
So James 3:1 cannot mean:
Teachers must never be wrong.
If that were the standard, there could be no teachers.
The concern is something deeper.
The faithful pastor knows that the Bible in front of him does not belong to him.
The congregation does not gather to hear the pastor's wisdom dressed in biblical language.
The task is to hear **God's Word**.
That realization ought occasionally to make the preacher tremble.
There were times during sermon preparation when the text refused to say what the preacher initially expected it to say.
That is an important moment.
The temptation is to make the text cooperate.
The responsibility is to let the text correct the preacher.
Sometimes the most faithful thing a teacher can say is:
“I was wrong about this.”
Or:
“I don't know.”
Or:
“I need to study this more carefully.”
Those sentences do not diminish faithful teaching.
Sometimes they demonstrate it.

6. When Personal Opinion Becomes God's Word

Perhaps one of the most subtle dangers in Christian teaching is the gradual blending of Scripture with personal conviction.
Every teacher brings something to the text.
Background.
Tradition.
Experience.
Culture.
Education.
Theology.
Assumptions.
None of us approaches Scripture as an entirely blank page.
The danger comes when we stop recognizing the distinction between what **Scripture actually says** and what **we have concluded from it**.
A pastor may hold a sincere conviction.

That conviction may even be wise.
But sincerity does not automatically turn personal conviction into divine command.
The teacher bears responsibility for distinguishing between:
“Scripture says…”
and
“I believe…”
There is room for both.
But they are not always the same thing.
James's warning encourages the teacher to approach Scripture with enough humility to know the difference.

7. Teaching Is More Than Words

There is another dimension to James's warning.
A teacher teaches twice.
Once through words.
And again through life.
People listen to sermons.
But they also watch the preacher.
They hear lessons about patience and then observe how the teacher treats someone difficult.
They hear teaching about generosity and observe how the teacher handles money.
They hear sermons about humility and watch what happens when the pastor is criticized.
They hear lessons about grace and notice whether grace appears in the teacher's relationships.
This does not mean the teacher must live without failure.
Again:
“in many things we offend all.”
It means the teacher cannot pretend that Christian teaching ends when the lesson ends.
The teacher's life becomes part of the lesson.
Sometimes unintentionally.

8. A Word to Those Who Teach

James 3:1 should never be used to discourage someone whom God has genuinely called to teach.
The Church desperately needs faithful teachers.
It needs pastors who love Scripture.
Sunday school teachers who prepare carefully.
Bible study leaders who refuse to pretend they know what they do not know.
Parents who teach their children about Christ.

Mentors who patiently help younger believers grow.
James is not saying:
"Do not teach."
He is saying:
"Know what you are accepting when you do."
Teaching God's Word is a privilege.
It is also a stewardship.
And stewardship always involves accountability.
Perhaps every person who teaches Scripture should occasionally pray something like:
Lord, let me never use Your Word to make myself important.
Let me never place my opinion in Your mouth.
Let me never become so accustomed to speaking about You that I stop listening to You.
And when I am wrong, give me enough humility to admit it.

9. The Teacher Beneath the Word

There is a picture worth carrying with us beyond this verse.
Imagine a pastor standing before a congregation holding an open Bible.
It may appear that the pastor stands on one side and the congregation on the other.
James reminds us that spiritually, the arrangement is different.
There is God.
There is His Word.
And beneath that Word stand **both pastor and congregation**.
The teacher may have been given responsibility to explain the text.
But the teacher remains accountable to the same Word.
That is why the faithful teacher does not stand above Scripture and explain it to everyone below.
The faithful teacher stands beneath the Word of God, submits to it, and invites others to stand there too.
And perhaps that is the safest place any teacher can stand.

Pastoral Reflection

For those who have served in pastoral ministry, James 3:1 can never be entirely academic.
There is something deeply humbling about looking across a congregation and realizing that people have trusted you to help them understand God.
Some are grieving.
Some are frightened.
Some are struggling with their faith.
Some are carrying guilt.
Some are searching for direction.

Some may make decisions based partly upon what they hear from the pulpit.
That trust should never be taken lightly.
But neither should the weight of James 3:1 cause a faithful pastor to despair.
The very next verse reminds us that God works through imperfect people.
The responsibility is not to be flawless.
The responsibility is to be **faithful**.
Study carefully.
Pray deeply.
Listen before speaking.
Distinguish God's Word from personal opinion.
Remain teachable.
Admit mistakes.
And never become so comfortable handling holy things that they cease to feel holy.
Perhaps the pastor who occasionally trembles before preaching is not demonstrating weakness.
Perhaps that trembling simply means he still understands what he has been asked to do.

Something Worth Pondering

James begins his teaching about the tongue with those whose words may carry the greatest spiritual influence.
That should cause every teacher to examine not merely **what** he teaches, but the spirit with which he teaches it.

Ask yourself this

If I teach God's Word, do I approach Scripture primarily looking for something to say to others—or do I first allow God to say something to me?
And perhaps the harder question:
Have I ever been so certain that I was speaking for God that I failed to consider whether I might actually have been speaking for myself?
The faithful teacher never outgrows the need to listen.
Before we speak for God,
we must first be willing to hear Him.

A Closer Look

James 3:2 — Stumbling in Speech

“For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.”
— James 3:2, KJV

James has just said something capable of making any conscientious teacher uncomfortable:

“We who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”

Then, almost immediately, he says:

“For in many things we offend all.”

Those two statements belong together.

James does not withdraw the responsibility of verse 1.

Teachers remain accountable for what they teach.

But neither does James create an impossible picture of the Christian teacher as someone who must never misunderstand, misspeak, stumble, or fail.

Instead, James does something remarkably humble.

He includes himself.

“All of us.”

Not:

All of you.

Not:

Those immature Christians.

Not:

People who have not yet reached my level of spiritual maturity.

All of us.

James—the leader of the Jerusalem church, the teacher writing this letter, the man who has just warned other teachers about stricter judgment—places himself among those who stumble.

There is something deeply reassuring in that honesty.

1. “All of Us…”

James has a remarkable ability to confront sin without pretending that he stands outside the human condition.

He has already done it in verse 1:

“we who teach.”

Now he does it again:

“in many things we offend all.”

James does not weaken his authority by admitting his own vulnerability.

He strengthens it.

There is a profound difference between a teacher who says:

"You people need to get yourselves straightened out,"
and one who says:
"Brothers and sisters, this is something we must bring before God together."
The second teacher still teaches.
The second teacher may still correct.
The second teacher may even need to rebuke.
But he does so knowing that he too lives by grace.
That realization should shape the spirit of Christian teaching.
The pastor who remembers that he also stumbles is less likely to humiliate the person who has fallen.
The teacher who remembers needing forgiveness is better prepared to teach about forgiveness.
The Christian who remembers his own dependence upon mercy is less likely to withhold mercy from someone else.
James's **"all of us"** leaves no room for spiritual superiority.

2. "Make Many Mistakes"

The word James uses carries the idea of **stumbling**.
That image is important.
A person can be walking in the right direction and still stumble.
Stumbling does not necessarily mean the journey has been abandoned.
It means the person walking has lost footing.
That distinction matters in the Christian life.
James is not saying sin is unimportant.
Throughout this letter he takes obedience extremely seriously.
But neither does he describe Christian maturity as reaching a point where stumbling becomes impossible.
We stumble.
Sometimes through ignorance.
Sometimes through carelessness.
Sometimes through weakness.
Sometimes because old habits are stronger than we realized.
Sometimes because anger reaches our mouth before wisdom does.
Sometimes because pride convinces us that we are right.
And sometimes we know perfectly well what we ought to do and simply fail to do it.
James does not say:
"Some of us stumble occasionally."
He says:
"in many things we offend all."
There is realism in that sentence.
Christian faith is not pretending that believers never fail.

Christian faith teaches us what to do **when we recognize that we have failed.**
We confess.
We repent.
We seek forgiveness.
We repair what can be repaired.
We learn.
We get back up.
And by God's grace, we continue walking.

3. James Does Not Excuse the Stumble

There is an important caution here.
James's acknowledgment that everyone stumbles must never become permission to remain where we fall.
It would be easy to turn:
"in many things we offend all"
into:
"Nobody's perfect, so it doesn't really matter."
James would never accept that conclusion.
Remember the James we have already encountered.
"Be doers of the word."
"Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."
James expects transformation.
Grace does not make obedience unnecessary.
Grace makes restoration possible when obedience fails.
There is an enormous difference between saying:
"I stumbled, therefore I need God's grace and must get back up,"
and saying:
"Everyone stumbles, therefore I see no reason to change."
One is humility.
The other can become an excuse.
James gives us no such excuse.

4. The Particular Danger of Speech

Then James narrows his attention:
"If any man offend not in word is mature…"
Of all the ways human beings stumble, James singles out **speech**.
That should make us pay attention.
Why is controlling our words such a significant measure of maturity?
Perhaps because speech exposes us so quickly.
Many sins require opportunity.
Some require planning.
Some require resources.
The tongue requires almost nothing.

Someone irritates us.
Someone challenges us.
Someone embarrasses us.
Someone disagrees with us.
Someone says something unfair.
And within seconds, what lives inside us can come pouring out.
Sometimes our mouths reveal things about our hearts that we would rather not know were there.
Resentment.
Jealousy.
Pride.
Contempt.
Impatience.
Bitterness.
A desire to win.
A desire to hurt.
And sometimes the words escape before we have had time to construct the carefully controlled Christian version of ourselves we prefer others to see.
That may be part of James's point.
The tongue frequently reveals the person behind the appearance.

5. "If any man offend not in word…"

James sets an extraordinarily high standard.
If someone never stumbled in speech, James says that person would be:
"mature."
The idea is not merely intellectual maturity.
James is describing completeness—someone whose character has reached a remarkable degree of spiritual wholeness.
This connects beautifully with something James told us near the beginning of the letter.
In James 1:4, perseverance was to have its full effect:
"so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing."
Now the idea of maturity appears again.
James is showing us another dimension of that maturity.
The mature Christian is not merely someone who knows a great deal about Scripture.
Not merely someone who has been in church for decades.
Not merely someone who can explain complicated theology.
Not merely someone who occupies a leadership position.
Maturity can sometimes be measured much more simply:
Listen to how the person speaks.
How does he speak when frustrated?

How does she speak about someone who is absent?
How does he respond when criticized?
How does she speak to someone who cannot benefit her?
How does he speak when he is certain he is right?
How does she speak when she has been wronged?
Those moments may reveal more about spiritual maturity than an impressive theological vocabulary ever could.

6. Knowing When Not to Speak

There is another aspect of mature speech that deserves attention.
Sometimes controlling the tongue means choosing the right words.
Sometimes it means choosing **no words at all.**
James has already prepared us for this:
"Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak…"
There are moments when silence is not weakness.
It is wisdom.
Not every accusation requires an immediate response.
Not every disagreement requires our opinion.
Not every rumor deserves repetition.
Not every irritating comment needs correction.
Not every thought that enters our mind needs to leave through our mouth.
One sign of maturity may be the growing recognition that possessing something to say does not necessarily create an obligation to say it.
Sometimes one of the most spiritually mature sentences we never speak is the one we desperately wanted to say.

7. Words Cannot Always Be Retrieved

There is a practical reason James takes speech so seriously.
Once words are spoken, we lose control over them.
We can regret them.
We can apologize.
We can explain what we intended.
We can ask forgiveness.
We may even receive forgiveness.
But we cannot make the words unheard.
A sentence may take three seconds to speak and thirty years to forget.
That is extraordinary power for something requiring so little effort.
Many of us can remember words spoken to us long ago.
Perhaps a parent said something that gave us confidence.
Perhaps a teacher saw ability in us that we did not see in ourselves.
Perhaps a pastor spoke hope during a terrible season.
Those words may still live within us.
Unfortunately, painful words can live just as long.

That is why controlling speech is not merely about avoiding profanity or obvious cruelty.
It is recognizing that when we speak into another person's life, we are handling something potentially powerful.

8. “Able to Keep the Whole Body in Check…”

Then James makes an intriguing connection.
The person capable of controlling speech, he says, is:
“able also to bridle the whole body.”
Now James begins preparing us for the illustration in verse 3.
The tongue may be small, but learning to govern something so difficult reveals a broader kind of self-control.
James is not suggesting that controlling speech automatically eliminates every other temptation.
Rather, the tongue becomes an indicator.
If we can learn, through God's wisdom and grace, to govern the part of ourselves that reacts so quickly and reveals so much, that discipline reaches beyond speech.
The person who learns to pause before speaking is learning self-control.
The person who refuses to retaliate immediately is learning self-control.
The person who listens before answering is learning self-control.
The person who refuses to repeat gossip is learning self-control.
The person who can say, **“I was wrong,”** is learning self-control.
And the person who can remain silent when pride desperately wants the last word is learning self-control.
The tongue becomes both a challenge and a training ground for Christian maturity.

9. Not Perfection, but Maturity

James gives us an important distinction.
He begins:
“In many things we offend all.”
Then he describes the person who never stumbles in speech as mature.
Taken together, those statements keep us from two dangerous extremes.
The first is **perfectionism**:
“A genuine Christian would never say the wrong thing.”
James has already rejected that.
All of us stumble.
The second is **complacency**:
“Everyone says things they shouldn't, so it doesn't matter.”
James rejects that too.
Our speech should increasingly come under the transforming influence of Christ.

Christian maturity does not mean we reach a place where grace is no longer necessary.
It means grace is gradually changing the places where we once stumbled without concern.
Perhaps maturity can sometimes be seen in the distance between the person we once were and the person God is forming us to become.
We may still stumble.
But perhaps we stumble less frequently.
We recognize it more quickly.
We apologize more readily.
We defend ourselves less aggressively.
We listen more carefully.
We speak more gently.
And increasingly, we ask before speaking:
Will these words accomplish something worthy of the Christ whose name I bear?
That is growth.
That is transformation.
And James calls us toward it.

Pastoral Reflection

There is something deeply pastoral about James's movement from verse 1 to verse 2.
Verse 1 gives teachers a tremendous responsibility.
Verse 2 reminds them:
You are still human.
The pastor who takes James 3:1 seriously may sometimes leave the pulpit remembering a sentence he wishes he had phrased differently.
The teacher may later discover that an interpretation needs correction.
The Bible study leader may answer a question and afterward realize the answer was incomplete.
James does not tell such people to abandon their calling.
He reminds them to remain humble within it.
There is freedom in being able to say:
"I got that wrong."
There is strength in saying:
"I need to study that before I answer."
There is maturity in saying:
"I should not have said that. Please forgive me."
Those words do not destroy credibility.
When they are sincere, they can demonstrate Christian character.
The goal is not to become a person who never needs grace.

The goal is to become a person increasingly shaped by the grace we continually receive.
And perhaps nowhere is that transformation tested more frequently than in the few inches between the heart and the tongue.

Something Worth Pondering

James has removed two excuses from us.
We cannot say:
"A mature Christian never stumbles,"
because James says **all of us stumble.**
But neither can we say:
"Since everyone stumbles, my words do not matter,"
because James makes control of speech one of his measures of spiritual maturity.
So we are left with a much more personal question.

Ask yourself this

When my words hurt someone, is my first instinct to justify what I said—or to consider what my words reveal about me?
And perhaps another:
Am I becoming easier to correct, quicker to apologize, slower to speak in anger, and more willing to leave some things unsaid than I was a year ago?
Because perhaps the question is not:
"Do I ever stumble?"
James has already answered that.
We all do.
The more revealing question may be:
"When I stumble, what is God teaching me about how to walk more faithfully?"

A Closer Look

James 3:3 — The Bit and the Horse

“Behold, we put bits in the horses’ mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body.”
— James 3:3, KJV

James has just told us that the person who does not stumble in speech is mature, **“able also to bridle the whole body.”**
Now he develops the image.
A horse is large.
Powerful.
Capable of moving with tremendous strength and speed.
Yet James asks us to consider something remarkably small:
the bit placed in its mouth.
Compared with the animal, the bit seems insignificant.
But its size tells us almost nothing about its influence.
Through that small point of contact, a rider can communicate direction to the entire animal.
James's point is simple enough to understand.
It is much more difficult to live.
Small things can exercise enormous influence.
And few things demonstrate that truth more clearly than our words.

1. Something Small Governing Something Large

James deliberately chooses an image of disproportion.
The horse possesses the strength.
The bit does not.
The horse possesses the size.
The bit does not.
The horse provides the movement.
The bit does not.
Yet the bit helps determine **where all that strength and movement will go.**
That is the comparison James wants us to see.
The tongue is a small part of the body.
Our words may consist of nothing more than a few sounds produced in a matter of seconds.
Yet those words can influence the direction of something much larger.
A conversation.
A relationship.
A family.

A congregation.
A workplace.
Sometimes even a life.
We tend to measure importance by size.
James warns us not to do that with speech.
A sentence may be small.
Its consequences may not be.

2. The Bit Does Not Supply the Power

There is something else worth noticing in James's illustration.
The bit does not create the horse's power.
It directs power that already exists.
That may help us understand something important about speech.
Our words often give direction to emotions, desires, convictions, and attitudes already present within us.
Anger may exist within the heart.
Words can determine where that anger goes.
Compassion may exist within the heart.
Words can give that compassion expression.
Fear may be present.
Words can spread that fear to others—or bring reassurance.
Conflict may already exist.
Words can intensify it or begin moving it toward reconciliation.
The tongue often becomes the means through which what exists inside us begins affecting the world around us.
That is why James will eventually take us deeper than vocabulary.
The problem is not merely the tongue.
The question ultimately becomes:
Who—or what—is directing it?

3. "To Make Them Obey Us…"

James says the bit is placed in the horse's mouth **"to make them obey us."**
The image is one of disciplined strength.
The horse's power has not disappeared.
It has come under direction.
That is an important distinction when thinking about Christian speech.
James is not teaching that Christians should become timid people who never speak forcefully.
There are times when strong words are necessary.
There are times when injustice must be confronted.
There are times when truth must be spoken even when people would rather not hear it.
Jesus Himself sometimes spoke with extraordinary directness.

So controlling the tongue does not mean eliminating strength from our speech.
It means bringing that strength under **godly direction**.
A controlled horse is not necessarily a weak horse.
It is a powerful horse whose strength can be directed toward a purpose.
Likewise, a controlled tongue is not a silent tongue.
It is a tongue increasingly governed by wisdom.

4. The Difference Between Reaction and Response

Perhaps one practical expression of James's teaching is learning the difference between **reacting** and **responding**.
Reaction is immediate.
Someone says something hurtful.
We answer.
Someone criticizes us.
We defend ourselves.
Someone embarrasses us.
We retaliate.
Someone raises a voice.
We raise ours.
The emotion moves, and the tongue follows.
But Christian maturity gradually introduces something between the emotion and the words:
wisdom.
Sometimes it may be only a few seconds.
A pause.
A breath.
A moment in which we remember James's earlier instruction:
"Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger."
Nothing about the situation may have changed during those few seconds.
But perhaps something within us has.
Instead of asking:
"What do I feel like saying?"
we begin asking:
"What should I say?"
Those are very different questions.
The first allows emotion to hold the reins.
The second begins handing them to wisdom.

5. Words Establish Direction

The most important phrase in James's illustration may be the last one:
"we guide their whole bodies."

The bit establishes direction.
That gives us an important way of evaluating our speech.
We often ask whether something we said was **true**.
That is certainly important.
Christians should speak truth.
But truthfulness alone does not exhaust our responsibility.
We might also ask:
Where are these words taking us?
Suppose two people disagree.
One sentence may move the conversation toward understanding.
Another may move it toward hostility.
One may open a door.
Another may slam it shut.
One may allow the other person to preserve dignity.
Another may humiliate.
Both speakers may believe they are defending truth.
But James asks us to notice **direction**.
Where is this conversation going because of the words I am choosing?
That question becomes particularly important when we are angry.
Because anger has a destination it would very much like our words to reach.
Usually, it is not reconciliation.

6. The Words Spoken at Home

Perhaps the most revealing place to apply James 3:3 is not the church.
It is home.
We often exercise greater care with our words around strangers than around the people we love most.
At church we may be patient.
At work we may remain professional.
With acquaintances we may choose our words carefully.
Then we come home.
And because home feels safe, the restraints sometimes disappear.
A husband speaks to his wife in a way he would never speak to a coworker.
A wife speaks to her husband with a contempt she would never display toward a stranger.
Parents say things to children in frustration that they would be horrified to hear another adult say to them.
Children discover precisely which words will hurt a parent most.
The people closest to us often receive the least filtered version of our speech.
James's bit belongs there too.

Perhaps especially there.
Christian maturity is not demonstrated merely by how graciously we speak when everyone is watching.
It is also demonstrated by how we speak to those who know us well enough to see us when the reins are being tested.

7. A Few Words Can Change a Life

The power of direction is not always negative.
Sometimes a few words alter the course of someone's life for the better.
A teacher notices ability in a student and says:
"You are good at this."
A parent says:
"I believe in you."
A friend says:
"You don't have to go through this alone."
A pastor tells someone burdened by failure:
"God's grace is larger than what you have done."
A spouse says:
"Whatever happens, we'll face it together."
None of those statements requires many words.
But they can become a bit in the best sense of James's illustration.
They can redirect fear toward courage.
Despair toward hope.
Isolation toward belonging.
Shame toward grace.
Confusion toward purpose.
Sometimes we never discover how much a sentence mattered.
The person who spoke it may forget it entirely.
The person who heard it may remember it for the rest of life.

8. Who Holds the Reins?

There is a deeper spiritual question hidden within James's illustration.
A bit does not direct a horse by itself.
Someone holds the reins.
That raises a question James does not explicitly ask in verse 3 but one that fits the direction of his teaching:
Who holds the reins of my speech?
Anger?
Pride?
Fear?
Resentment?
The need to be right?
The desire to impress?
The desire to retaliate?

Or increasingly:
the wisdom of God?
James began his letter by telling believers who lack wisdom to ask God.
Now we begin to see one of the places where that wisdom is desperately needed.
Before the sentence.
Before the response.
Before the email.
Before the argument.
Before the correction.
Before the sermon.
Before the words leave us and begin directing something beyond us.
Lord, give me wisdom.
Sometimes that may be one of the most practical prayers a Christian can pray.

9. The Tongue as an Instrument of Grace

James will soon emphasize the destructive capacity of the tongue.
But we should not rush past the positive possibility contained in the bit.
A bit can guide a powerful animal toward the right destination.
Likewise, words placed under God's wisdom can become instruments of remarkable good.
Words can reconcile.
Words can comfort.
Words can teach.
Words can confess.
Words can forgive.
Words can defend someone being mistreated.
Words can speak truth when silence would be cowardice.
Words can bring hope into a room where hope has nearly disappeared.
Words can proclaim Christ.
The tongue is powerful.
James does not ask us to eliminate that power.
He asks us to recognize it and bring it under control.
Because power under godly direction can become **service**.

Pastoral Reflection

Most of us will never guide a thousand-pound horse with a bit.
But every day we guide something with words.
Sometimes we guide a conversation.
Sometimes a relationship.
Sometimes the emotional atmosphere of a home.
Sometimes another person's understanding of himself.

And for those who teach, sometimes we help guide another person's understanding of God.
That should cause us to speak carefully.
But it should also remind us of the extraordinary opportunity contained in ordinary conversation.
We do not need a pulpit to speak grace.
We do not need a classroom to encourage someone.
We do not need a theological degree to say:
"I forgive you."
"I'm sorry."
"I'm proud of you."
"I'm here."
"Let's pray about this."
"God has not forgotten you."
Small words.
Perhaps enormous consequences.
James wants us to recognize the bit in the horse's mouth and then recognize the tongue within our own.
The question is not whether our words possess influence.
They do.
The question is whether that influence is being directed by the wisdom of God.

Something Worth Pondering

James asks us to consider something small controlling the direction of something much larger.
Perhaps we should therefore pay attention not merely to the words we speak, but to the direction they establish.

Ask yourself this

Where are my words taking the people closest to me?
Toward courage or discouragement?
Toward reconciliation or resentment?
Toward confidence or shame?
Toward Christ—or merely toward agreement with me?
And perhaps before the next difficult conversation, we might ask one simple question:
Who is holding the reins?
Because sometimes the direction of something very large can change through something very small.
Even a few words.

A Closer Look

James 3:4 — The Helm and the Ship

“Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth.”
— James 3:4, KJV
James has asked us to consider a horse.
Now he takes us to sea.
The illustration changes, but the principle remains:
Something very small can influence the direction of something much larger.
But James adds an important element this time.
The ship is not sitting peacefully in calm water.
There are **strong winds**.
Forces outside the ship are pushing against it.
And still, James tells us, a relatively small rudder can influence where the vessel goes.
That makes this more than another illustration about size.
It becomes an illustration about **direction under pressure**.
And that may make James's picture particularly appropriate for the way we use our words.

1. “Or Look at Ships…”

James invites his readers simply to observe something familiar.
Look.
Consider the ship.
Ancient ships were obviously much smaller than modern vessels, but compared with the people aboard them they were still enormous structures. They carried passengers, crews, cargo, and sometimes soldiers across waters that could become dangerous very quickly.
James wants his readers to notice the contrast.
The ship is large.
The rudder is small.
Yet the small rudder matters enormously.
Once again James is challenging our instinct to associate size with importance.
The tongue may be small.
A sentence may be brief.
A conversation may last only minutes.
But none of those things tells us how important their effects may become.

2. “Though They Are So Large…”

There are things in our lives that seem much larger than our words.
A marriage.
A family.
A friendship.
A church.
A career.
A reputation.
A person's confidence.
A child's developing understanding of himself or herself.
A believer's understanding of God.
These things are large because they are built over time.
And yet James reminds us that small words can influence their direction.
A marriage built over decades can be strengthened by words spoken consistently with love and respect.
It can also be weakened by repeated contempt.
A child's confidence can grow through encouragement.
It can also slowly disappear beneath constant criticism.
A congregation can become a community where grace is spoken freely.
Or it can become a place where gossip quietly determines how people see one another.
The ship is large.
The rudder is small.
But the direction of the ship may still depend upon the rudder.

3. “Driven by Strong Winds”

This detail deserves our attention.
James could simply have said:
Large ships are controlled by small rudders.
That would have made his point.
Instead, he mentions the **strong winds** driving the ship.
The vessel is being acted upon by forces outside itself.
That gives us an important picture of human speech.
It is relatively easy to control our words when everything is calm.
The real test often comes when the wind begins to blow.
Someone criticizes us unfairly.
Wind.
Someone misunderstands our motives.
Wind.
Someone speaks harshly to us.
Wind.
We are tired.
Wind.

We are frightened.
Wind.
We are under pressure at work.
Wind.
Something at home has gone wrong.
Wind.
Someone brings up an old wound.
Wind.
Someone challenges something we deeply believe.
Wind.
Those are the moments when the rudder matters.
Anyone can appear patient when the sea is calm.
Christian maturity is often revealed when something begins pushing against us.

4. When the Wind Does Not Determine the Destination

A ship cannot control the wind.
But the wind does not necessarily determine where the ship ultimately goes.
That is a valuable spiritual principle.
We cannot always control what someone says to us.
We cannot control whether someone misunderstands us.
We cannot prevent every criticism.
We cannot arrange life so that no one ever irritates us.
We cannot eliminate stress, disappointment, exhaustion, grief, or frustration.
Those winds will blow.
But the existence of the wind does not require us to surrender the rudder.
Someone else's anger does not have to determine our response.
Someone else's cruelty does not require cruelty from us.
Someone else's raised voice does not require ours to rise.
Someone else's gossip does not require our participation.
Someone else's insult does not require retaliation.
The wind may influence the difficulty of the journey.
It does not have to determine the character of the traveler.
That distinction matters.
We sometimes excuse our words by pointing to the wind:
"You made me angry."
"You should have heard what she said first."
"He started it."
"I wouldn't have said that if they hadn't…"
Perhaps the wind really was strong.

Perhaps we genuinely were treated unfairly.
James does not deny the wind.
He asks us to notice the **rudder**.

5. "A Very Small Rudder"

Again James emphasizes disproportion.
Large ship.
Strong winds.
Small rudder.
The rudder does not look impressive compared with the forces surrounding it.
Yet it occupies a strategic position.
That may describe our words remarkably well.
A gentle sentence in the middle of an argument can change its direction.
So can a cruel one.
Consider the difference between:
"You always do this."
and:
"Help me understand what happened."
Between:
"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."
and:
"I see this differently."
Between:
"You're impossible."
and:
"We're both getting angry. Maybe we need to approach this differently."
The disagreement may still exist.
The wind may still be blowing.
But the rudder has moved.
Sometimes the direction of an entire conversation changes because one person chooses not to answer hostility with hostility.
That is not weakness.
Sometimes it requires considerably more strength than retaliation.

6. "Wherever the Will of the Pilot Directs"

Here James adds something that was only implied in the horse illustration.
There is a **pilot**.
The rudder does not decide where the ship goes.
Someone directs it.
That brings us to a deeper question about the tongue.
Words do not simply appear.
They arise from somewhere.
They express intention.

Desire.
Emotion.
Conviction.
Character.
The tongue is the rudder.
But something deeper holds the steering mechanism.
James will take us there eventually.
In verses 13–18, he will distinguish between two kinds of wisdom.
One produces envy, selfish ambition, disorder, and wickedness.
The other is:
"pure, then peaceable, gentle, easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits…"
Perhaps we can already see where James is going.
The ultimate question is not merely:
Can I control my tongue?
It is:
What wisdom is directing it?
Because a rudder can steer a ship toward safe harbor.
It can also steer toward danger.
Control by itself is not enough.
Direction matters.

7. The Need to Be Right

One of the strongest winds in human conversation is the desire to be right.
Sometimes we are right.
That can actually make the danger greater.
When we know our position is correct, we may begin believing that any method of defending it is justified.
We can speak harshly.
Humiliate.
Mock.
Dismiss.
Interrupt.
Refuse to listen.
And afterward justify everything by saying:
"But I was right."
James challenges that kind of thinking.
Truth matters enormously.
But the way truth is spoken also reveals something about the person speaking it.
Being correct does not give us permission to be cruel.
Winning an argument is not always the same thing as accomplishing something good.

Sometimes we can win the argument and lose the person.
The question is not merely:
"Was I right?"
It may also be:
"Where did my words take us?"
The pilot should know the destination before moving the rudder.

8. The Rudder in the Church

James's illustration has particular importance within Christian community.
Churches are made up of people.
Where there are people, there will eventually be disagreement.
Different backgrounds.
Different personalities.
Different expectations.
Different interpretations.
Different ideas about how things should be done.
The presence of disagreement does not necessarily indicate an unhealthy church.
What happens **during disagreement** may tell us much more.
Words can steer a congregation.
A whispered criticism becomes another conversation.
Then another.
Soon people begin taking sides.
Motives are assigned.
Trust weakens.
And eventually everyone wonders how the church reached such troubled waters.
Sometimes the answer is painfully simple:
a small rudder moved repeatedly in the wrong direction.
But the opposite is also possible.
A gracious conversation can prevent misunderstanding.
An apology can stop resentment from spreading.
A refusal to repeat gossip can end it.
A willingness to listen can prevent division.
A pastor who responds to criticism without defensiveness can change the atmosphere of an entire discussion.
Again:
Small rudder.
Large ship.
Significant direction.

9. We Are Not Helpless in the Wind

There is something encouraging in James's illustration.

Strong winds exist.
Yet James still talks about steering.
That means we are not merely helpless victims of circumstance.
Through God's grace and wisdom, we can learn to respond differently.
We may not control the first emotion that rises within us.
But we can learn not to give every emotion a microphone.
We may not control the words spoken to us.
But we can increasingly learn to control the words spoken **by us**.
We may not control the wind.
But we can pay attention to the rudder.
And sometimes that begins with the simplest discipline imaginable:
pause.
Before answering.
Before sending the message.
Before posting the comment.
Before correcting.
Before defending.
Before saying the sentence we already know will hurt.
Pause long enough to ask:
Where will these words take us?
That small pause may itself become part of the rudder.

10. The Pilot Needs Wisdom

James has already given us the prayer for moments like these.
Back in Chapter 1:
"If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God…"
We usually imagine asking God for wisdom when facing major decisions.
Which job?
Which direction?
What should I do about this crisis?
But perhaps we need God's wisdom just as desperately in ordinary conversation.
Lord, what should I say?
Lord, should I say anything?
Lord, am I trying to help—or merely trying to win?
Lord, is my anger holding the rudder right now?
Lord, where will these words take us?
That is wisdom made practical.
And perhaps some of the most important guidance God gives us concerns not the great decisions of life, but the next sentence leaving our mouths.

Pastoral Reflection

There will always be winds.

We cannot build a life in which everyone agrees with us, understands us, treats us fairly, and never disappoints us.
Nor should we expect the Church to be a place where no disagreement ever occurs.
James gives us something more realistic.
There will be strong winds.
The question is what happens to the rudder when they come.
Does anger take control?
Does pride?
Does fear?
Does the desperate need to have the last word?
Or are we becoming people who can remain under God's direction even when circumstances push hard against us?
Perhaps Christian maturity is not demonstrated by sailing only on calm seas.
Perhaps it is demonstrated when the wind is blowing hard and Christ can still be recognized in the way we steer.
That includes our words.
Especially our words.
Because sometimes a conversation is already being pushed by powerful winds, and one gracious sentence changes its direction.
Sometimes someone has to move the rudder first.
Perhaps James is asking whether that someone might be us.

Something Worth Pondering

James asks us to picture a large ship, powerful winds, and a small rudder.
We may not be able to control the wind.
But we are responsible for the direction in which we steer.

Ask yourself this

What happens to my words when the winds become strong—when I am criticized, misunderstood, tired, angry, embarrassed, or certain that I am right?
Do I surrender the rudder to the wind, or do I still seek the wisdom of God before I speak?
And perhaps before our next difficult conversation:
Where do I want this conversation to end—and will the words I am about to speak help steer us there?
Because the strongest wind in the world does not make the rudder insignificant.
Sometimes it makes the rudder **more important than ever.**

A Closer Look

James 3:5 — A Little Member and a Little Fire

“Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!”
— James 3:5, KJV

James has shown us the bit.
Small enough to fit within the mouth of a horse, yet capable of helping direct the entire animal.
He has shown us the rudder.
Small compared with the ship and the powerful winds surrounding it, yet capable of influencing the vessel's direction.
Now James finally names what those illustrations have been pointing toward:
the tongue.
“Even so the tongue is a little member…”
There is the comparison.
Small bit.
Small rudder.
Small tongue.
But James has spent two verses teaching us not to confuse **smallness with insignificance**.
The tongue may occupy very little physical space.
Its influence can reach far beyond the person speaking.
And now James is about to show us just how far.

1. “So Also the Tongue…”

James has been preparing us carefully.
He did not begin by condemning speech.
That is important.
The bit and rudder are not inherently destructive.
A bit can guide a horse toward the proper destination.
A rudder can steer a ship safely through strong winds.
Likewise, the tongue can accomplish tremendous good.
With the tongue we teach.
Encourage.
Comfort.
Confess.
Apologize.
Forgive.
Pray.
Praise.

Speak truth.
Defend someone being mistreated.
Tell another person that he or she is loved.
Proclaim the Gospel.
Words can change lives for the better.
James does not deny any of that.
His concern is **power**.
Something capable of great good is often capable of great harm when directed wrongly.
A rudder can steer toward safe harbor.
It can also steer toward rocks.
And now James is going to take us from the possibility of direction to the possibility of devastation.

2. “A Small Member”

Again James emphasizes size.
The tongue is small.
That seems almost obvious enough not to require saying.
But James wants the contrast firmly planted in our minds because human beings tend to underestimate small things.
We say:
“It was only a comment.”
“I only said it once.”
“It was just a joke.”
“Those were only words.”
James has spent the previous two verses dismantling the word **“only.”**
Only a bit?
It directs a horse.
Only a rudder?
It directs a ship.
Only a spark?
Wait and see what happens to the forest.
The physical size of the tongue tells us nothing about the potential size of its consequences.

3. “Yet It Boasts of Great Exploits”

James now introduces another concern.
The tongue does not merely accomplish things.
It **boasts** about them.
Boasting has already appeared in James's letter, and it will appear again.
At its heart, boasting attempts to enlarge the self.
We want others to think more highly of us.
So we talk.
We describe what we have accomplished.

We make certain people know what we know.
We tell the story in a way that places us in the best possible light.
Sometimes we exaggerate.
Sometimes we do not technically say anything false; we simply arrange the truth very carefully.
We mention the details that make us look good.
We omit the ones that do not.
The tongue is remarkably capable of becoming its own public-relations department.
And perhaps that is why James's phrase is so revealing.
The tongue is physically small, yet it can create an enormous image of the person to whom it belongs.

4. When the Tongue Needs Recognition

There is a subtle spiritual danger here.
We can even boast about **good things**.
Ministry.
Service.
Knowledge of Scripture.
Generosity.
Sacrifice.
Spiritual experiences.
The problem is not necessarily that these things did not happen.
The question is why we need other people to know that they happened.
There is a difference between sharing what God has done and quietly arranging a story so that everyone notices what **we** have done.
Sometimes the difference exists only within the heart.
Jesus repeatedly warned against practicing righteousness in order to be seen by others.
James approaches the same human tendency from another direction.
The tongue loves recognition.
And because it speaks for us, it can manufacture recognition even when no one else thought to offer it.
That should make us examine not only whether our words are true, but why we feel compelled to speak them.
Sometimes the most revealing question is:
What am I hoping these words will cause people to think about me?

5. The Tongue Can Make Itself Larger Than It Is

There is another kind of boasting.
Sometimes the tongue makes claims larger than our actual character.
We can speak very convincingly about faith.

Love.
Forgiveness.
Humility.
Patience.
Generosity.
Mercy.
The words may be perfectly orthodox.
But James has spent the previous chapter warning us about a faith that exists only in words.
If our speech describes a Christian life that our conduct does not support, the tongue may be boasting of something the life has not yet demonstrated.
That connects Chapter 2 beautifully with Chapter 3.
In Chapter 2 James essentially asked:
Can I see your faith?
In Chapter 3 he begins asking:
Can I hear your faith?
And beneath both questions lies the same concern:
Does what we profess correspond with the life we actually live?

6. “How great a matter a little fire kindleth!”

Then James changes direction.
Suddenly we are no longer looking at horses and ships.
Imagine a spark at the edge of a forest.
The image immediately increases the scale.
A forest is vast compared with the spark that begins the fire.
Trees.
Brush.
Grass.
Wildlife.
Everything may appear peaceful.
And then something tiny begins burning.
Perhaps initially it seems manageable.
A flame.
A spark.
Something that could almost be ignored.
But fire has a characteristic the bit and rudder do not:
it spreads.
And that introduces an entirely new dimension to James's teaching about speech.
Words do not always remain where they are spoken.

7. Words Travel

Suppose someone tells another person something damaging about a third person.
One conversation.
Two people.
It seems contained.
But then the listener tells someone else.
That person tells another.
Perhaps someone adds an interpretation.
Someone else adds a detail.
Soon people who were never present for the original conversation possess opinions about someone they may barely know.
The original speaker may eventually say:
"That's not what I meant."
Perhaps not.
But the fire has moved beyond the match.
That is one of the terrifying characteristics of destructive speech:
we may lose control of what happens after we speak.
We control whether we strike the match.
We do not necessarily control where the fire goes afterward.

8. Gossip and the Forest Fire

Few things illustrate James's fire better than gossip.
Gossip often begins innocently enough.
Sometimes it even disguises itself as concern.
"I'm only telling you because I thought you should know…"
Or perhaps within Christian circles:
"We really need to pray for so-and-so…"
And then follows information that the person being discussed never intended to become public.
The language may sound spiritual.
The effect may still be gossip.
One useful question before sharing something about another person is:
Would I say this if that person were sitting beside me?
Another might be:
Does the person listening actually need to know this?
And perhaps another:
Am I sharing this to help—or because there is something satisfying about possessing information someone else does not have?
Those questions can stop a surprising number of fires before the match is struck.

9. “Set Ablaze by a Small Fire”

James emphasizes the disproportion once more.

Great forest.

Small fire.

The consequences may be enormous even though the beginning was tiny.

One accusation can damage a reputation.

One rumor can divide friends.

One sarcastic comment can humiliate a child.

One angry sentence can remain in a marriage long after the argument has ended.

One careless statement from a pastor can wound someone who trusted the pastor's spiritual authority.

And sometimes the speaker did not intend any of those consequences.

But James is teaching us that intention is not the only consideration.

We must also consider **potential effect**.

Before speaking, wisdom asks not merely:

“Do I have the right to say this?”

but:

“What might these words set in motion?”

10. Some Fires Burn Slowly

Not every destructive word produces an immediate explosion.

Some fires smolder.

Repeated criticism can slowly erode confidence.

Sarcasm can slowly weaken affection.

Contempt can slowly poison a marriage.

Constant negativity can slowly change the atmosphere of a home.

Gossip can slowly destroy trust within a congregation.

A person may not remember one particular sentence that caused the damage.

There may not have been one.

Instead, there were hundreds of small sparks.

Eventually something that once seemed healthy has been burned away.

That makes James's warning even more serious.

We should not evaluate our speech only by looking for dramatic disasters.

Sometimes we need to ask what our habitual words are slowly creating.

11. But Words Can Spread Goodness Too

James is moving toward a severe warning, and we should allow him to do so.

But the principle of spreading influence can work in another direction as well.

Encouragement can spread.

Grace can spread.
Truth can spread.
Hope can spread.
One person refuses to participate in gossip, and suddenly the conversation changes.
Someone speaks graciously about a person being criticized, and others reconsider their words.
A parent consistently speaks encouragement into a child's life, and that child eventually learns to encourage others.
A pastor speaks about grace, lives that grace, and a congregation gradually becomes more gracious.
A believer tells someone about Christ, and that person eventually tells someone else.
Words travel.
That is precisely why they matter.
The question is what we are sending into the world when we release them.

12. The Moment Before the Spark

Perhaps the most important moment in James's illustration occurs before the fire begins.
There is a moment when the forest is still intact.
The spark has not yet landed.
Nothing has burned.
That moment exists in conversation too.
It is the moment **before we speak**.
James has already given us instruction for that moment:
"Be quick to listen, slow to speak…"
Slow enough to consider.
Slow enough to pray.
Slow enough to ask whether what we are about to say is necessary.
Slow enough to ask whether it is true.
Slow enough to ask whether it is loving.
Slow enough to ask whether we are speaking from wisdom or anger.
Slow enough to ask:
If I strike this match, where might the fire go?
Once the words leave us, that moment is gone.
But before they do, there is still a choice.

13. From Direction to Destruction

James 3:3–5 contains a carefully developing argument.
First:
The bit.
Words possess influence.
Then:

The rudder.
Words establish direction.
Now:
The spark.
Words can produce consequences far beyond their apparent size.
The progression is important.
James is gradually increasing the seriousness of his warning.
He began Chapter 3 with responsibility.
Then self-control.
Then influence.
Then direction.
And now:
destruction.
The tone has changed.
And James is not finished.
Verse 5 asks how much a little fire can kindle. A forest fire gives us a picture of that contrast.
Verse 6 will make the identification unmistakable:
"And the tongue is a fire."
We have reached the edge of the next movement.
James has shown us the spark.
Now he is going to show us what burns.

Pastoral Reflection

Most of us have said something we wished we could retrieve.
Sometimes almost immediately.
The words leave our mouths, and somewhere inside us comes the realization:
I should not have said that.
But there is no reverse button for speech.
We can apologize.
And we should.
We can ask forgiveness.
And we should.
We can correct misinformation.
And we should.
We can attempt to repair damage.
And we should.
Grace makes reconciliation possible.
But repentance does not make the original words unspoken.
That is why James teaches us to respect the moment **before** the spark.
Perhaps Christian maturity sometimes looks surprisingly ordinary.
A sentence withheld.

A rumor not repeated.
An angry response delayed.
A sarcastic comment swallowed.
An accusation reconsidered.
An apology spoken quickly.
An encouraging word deliberately chosen.
None of those things looks dramatic.
Neither does a small rudder.
Neither does a bit.
Neither does a spark.
James's point is precisely that we should stop measuring significance by appearance.
The small things matter.
And perhaps nowhere is that more true than with the words we choose to release into another person's life.

Something Worth Pondering

James has taken us from the bit, to the rudder, to the spark.
Each is small.
Each possesses influence far beyond its size.
Now he asks us to consider what a tiny flame can become.

Ask yourself this

Have I ever started a fire with my words and then blamed the fire instead of acknowledging that I struck the match?
Do I sometimes repeat things simply because they are true without asking whether they are mine to tell?
When I speak about someone who is not present, am I protecting that person's dignity—or quietly setting fire to it?
And perhaps before speaking something we cannot retrieve, James invites us to ask:
If these words travel farther than I intend, am I willing for my name—and Christ's name—to travel with them?
Because the tongue is small.
The spark is small.
But James has brought us to a sobering truth:
A small beginning does not guarantee a small ending.

A Commentary on the Epistle of James

James 3:6–12 — The Untamable Tongue

“And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell. For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind: But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be. Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.”

— James 3:6–12, KJV

James has already compared the tongue to a bit in a horse's mouth and the rudder of a great ship. Both images demonstrate the extraordinary influence something small can exercise over something much larger.

But now the imagery changes.

“And the tongue is a fire.”

The bit directs.

The rudder guides.

Fire consumes.

James is no longer merely concerned with the tongue's ability to influence the direction of a life. He is concerned with its ability to damage and destroy.

A fire may begin with something almost insignificant—a spark, an ember, a flame scarcely large enough to notice. Yet once that fire finds something upon which to feed, it can spread far beyond the place where it began.

So can a word.

One careless sentence can damage a friendship that took years to build.

One accusation can destroy a reputation.

One angry response can wound a spouse, a child, a friend, or a fellow believer in ways the speaker never intended.

One piece of gossip can travel through a congregation long after anyone remembers who first spoke it.

And therein lies one of the frightening truths behind James's illustration:

We may be able to apologize for what we have said, but we cannot always retrieve it.
The word has already been spoken.
The fire has already begun to spread.
James intensifies the warning when he says that the tongue *"defileth the whole body."* The problem of destructive speech does not remain confined to the mouth. Words reveal character, shape relationships, influence communities, and can eventually affect the direction of an entire life.
A person may spend years building a reputation for wisdom, kindness, integrity, and faithfulness, only to discover how quickly reckless words can call that reputation into question.
James therefore refuses to treat speech as something spiritually insignificant.
What comes from our mouths is part of our discipleship.
How we speak when we are angry matters.
How we speak about someone who is absent matters.
How we speak about those with whom we disagree matters.
How we speak when no one expects us to behave like Christians matters.
And perhaps most revealing of all:
How we speak when we believe our anger is justified matters.
It is easy to control our words when there is nothing provoking us.
The real test often comes when we believe we have every reason not to.

1. The Creature Humanity Cannot Tame

James then makes an extraordinary comparison.
Human beings have demonstrated a remarkable ability to bring the created world under control.
James speaks broadly of beasts, birds, reptiles, and creatures of the sea.
Across the created order, humanity has learned to train creatures far larger, stronger, faster, and in some cases far more dangerous than ourselves.
Yet James says there is one thing humanity has not successfully mastered: **itself.**
More specifically:
"The tongue can no man tame."
There is deliberate irony here.
We can control powerful animals.
We can guide horses with bits.
We can steer ships with rudders.
We can harness forces in the world around us.
Yet the few inches between our hearts and our lips can still defeat us.

James is not suggesting that Christians should therefore surrender and say, *"Well, I cannot control my tongue, so there is nothing I can do about it."*
That would contradict everything he has been teaching.
Rather, James exposes the limits of human self-discipline.
We may learn to restrain our speech.
We may become wiser about when to speak and when to remain silent.
We may learn to recognize situations in which our emotions are likely to outrun our judgment.
All of those things matter.
But James's language suggests that something deeper than technique is required.
The tongue cannot finally be transformed merely by teaching the mouth better manners.
The heart from which the words come must be transformed.
James describes the tongue as *"an unruly evil, full of deadly poison."*
The word *restless* is important to the picture.
Something restless does not remain quietly where it belongs. It is unstable. It is always ready to move.
James has already used similar language earlier in the letter when describing instability in the person who doubts. Now he applies the idea to speech.
An uncontrolled tongue is always ready for another opportunity.
Another complaint.
Another rumor.
Another insult.
Another angry response.
Another opportunity to make ourselves look better by making someone else look worse.
And James adds another disturbing image:
"full of deadly poison."
Poison does not need to be dramatic to be deadly.
It can work quietly.
Gradually.
Almost invisibly.
So can words.
Not every destructive word produces an immediate explosion. Some words remain inside another person for years.
A child repeatedly told that he is worthless may eventually believe it.
A spouse continually belittled may slowly lose confidence and trust.
A congregation repeatedly exposed to gossip may gradually become suspicious and divided.

A friendship subjected to constant criticism may eventually die without anyone being able to identify the single moment when it happened.
Fire describes the tongue's ability to destroy quickly.
Poison describes its ability to destroy slowly.
James wants us to understand both.

2. Blessing God While Wounding His Image

Verse 9 may contain the theological heart of this entire passage:
"Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God."
James takes the problem of speech all the way back to creation.
Human beings are made in the **likeness of God**.
That means the person we belittle is someone God created.
The person about whom we gossip bears God's image.
The person with whom we disagree bears God's image.
The difficult coworker bears God's image.
The stranger bears God's image.
Even the person who has wounded us bears God's image.
This does not mean that wrongdoing should never be confronted. James himself speaks very directly when necessary. Nor does it mean that Christians must pretend every action or belief is good.
It means something much more demanding:
We must never allow our judgment of what someone has done to erase our recognition of what that person is.
They remain a human being created in the likeness of God.
That reality should place a restraint upon the way Christians speak about others—even when disagreement is legitimate and correction is necessary.
There is a profound contradiction in praising God while using the same mouth to degrade someone who bears God's likeness.
Imagine standing in worship and singing praises to God.
Perhaps only hours earlier we spoke cruelly about someone.
Perhaps only hours later we will.
James asks us to see the contradiction.
The problem is not that our worship was necessarily insincere.
The problem is that **our worship and our speech are supposed to belong to the same transformed life.**
We cannot comfortably separate the sacred words spoken in worship from the ordinary words spoken everywhere else.
The God we praise on Sunday is also Lord over what we say on Monday.
And so James gives one of the simplest moral judgments in the entire letter:
"My brethren, these things ought not so to be."

There is almost a sadness in those words.
James does not need an elaborate argument.
Those who belong to Christ should know better.
The mouth that blesses God should not delight in destroying those who bear His likeness.

3. The Problem Is Deeper Than Words

James then turns to nature.
Can the same spring produce both fresh water and salt water?
Can a fig tree produce olives?
Can a grapevine produce figs?
The expected answer is obvious.
No.
The nature of the source determines what comes from it.
A fig tree produces figs because that is what it is.
A grapevine produces grapes because that is what it is.
A spring produces water according to the character of its source.
And suddenly James's teaching about the tongue becomes much deeper than advice about watching what we say.
James is asking us to consider the **source**.
If blessing and cursing continually emerge from the same mouth, the problem cannot be solved merely by learning better vocabulary or exercising greater restraint.
Something deeper requires attention.
Jesus taught something remarkably similar when He taught that the mouth speaks from what fills the heart.
Our words eventually reveal something about what is happening within us.
Anger.
Pride.
Jealousy.
Fear.
Resentment.
Bitterness.
Self-righteousness.
Compassion.
Grace.
Mercy.
Love.
Sooner or later, what fills the spring finds its way into the water.
That can be uncomfortable because we often prefer to excuse harmful speech by pointing to the circumstances surrounding it.
“I was angry.”

“I was tired.”
“He pushed me too far.”
“She deserved to hear it.”
“I didn't really mean it.”
Certainly circumstances can influence our speech. Fatigue, stress, fear, frustration, and anger can weaken the restraints we normally place upon our words.
But perhaps that is precisely why those moments can reveal so much. When the restraints come down, what comes out?
James does not ask that question so that we will live in constant guilt over every poorly chosen word. His concern is transformation.
A Christian should be able to look honestly at his or her speech and ask:
What does this reveal about the spring?
If bitterness repeatedly appears in our words, perhaps bitterness needs to be addressed in the heart.
If contempt repeatedly appears, perhaps pride needs attention.
If gossip repeatedly appears, perhaps we need to examine why another person's failure gives us satisfaction.
If anger repeatedly becomes cruelty, perhaps the issue is deeper than having a short temper.
The tongue may reveal problems that the heart has learned to hide.
And that makes our speech something more than a matter of etiquette.
It can become a spiritual diagnostic.
Our words can show us where God's transforming work is still needed.

The Movement of James

James develops his warning through three increasingly uncomfortable observations.
First, **the tongue possesses extraordinary destructive power.**
It is a fire capable of staining the whole person and setting an entire course of life ablaze. What begins as something small can spread beyond our control, damaging people and relationships far beyond the moment in which the words were spoken.
Second, **human beings have accomplished something remarkable in the created world while remaining unable fully to master themselves.**
Animals of virtually every kind have been brought under human control. Creatures much larger, stronger, and more dangerous than we are have been trained and domesticated.
Yet James says:
“The tongue can no man tame.”
The problem is not simply that controlling our speech is difficult.
The problem is that we cannot finally master it by human discipline alone.
James calls it *“an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.”*

Fire can destroy suddenly.
Poison can destroy gradually.
The tongue is capable of both.
But then James reaches the deepest problem of all.
The same tongue that praises God can be used to tear down someone who bears God's image.
We can sing:
"Praise God!"
on Sunday morning and then speak contemptuously about another human being before the day is over.
James sees an enormous contradiction in this.
We bless the Creator while cursing someone who bears the Creator's likeness.
And James will not allow us to excuse that contradiction as merely part of being human.
His response is simple and direct:
"My brethren, these things ought not so to be."
Finally, James takes us beneath the words themselves.
A spring produces according to its source.
A tree produces according to its nature.
And our speech, particularly in unguarded moments, may reveal something about what is happening within us.
James therefore moves us from:
the tongue,
to **the words,**
to **the heart.**
The ultimate question is not merely how we can speak better.
It is how God can make us **better at the source**.

Pastoral Reflection

Most of us have probably experienced both sides of James's warning.
We remember words someone spoke to us years ago that still hurt.
Perhaps they were spoken by a parent, teacher, spouse, employer, pastor, friend, or someone whose opinion mattered deeply to us.
The speaker may have forgotten those words almost immediately.
We did not.
That is part of what makes James's image of fire and poison so painfully accurate.
Some words burn immediately.
Others remain.
We may carry them silently for years.
But there is another side we must be willing to confront.
Somewhere in another person's memory may be words **we** spoke.

Perhaps we were angry.
Perhaps we were frustrated.
Perhaps we thought we were being funny.
Perhaps we were technically correct but unnecessarily cruel.
Perhaps we never realized how deeply the words landed.
And perhaps the most difficult possibility is that we have completely forgotten saying something another person has never forgotten hearing.
James therefore invites us to examine our speech not merely by asking:
"Was what I said true?"
but also:
"Was it necessary?"
"Was it loving?"
"Was it intended to heal, correct, encourage, or restore—or simply to wound?"
Truth matters.
There are times when difficult things must be said.
There are times when Christians must confront wrongdoing.
There are times when silence would itself be unloving.
But truth spoken without love can become a weapon rather than a means of grace.
There is a difference between speaking truth because we desire someone's restoration and speaking truth because we enjoy being right.
There is a difference between correction and humiliation.
There is a difference between warning others about genuine danger and spreading gossip.
There is a difference between righteous anger and using righteousness as permission to be cruel.
James forces us to examine those differences.
He does not tell us that controlling the tongue will be easy. Quite the opposite.
"The tongue can no man tame."
That statement should drive the Christian not toward despair, but toward dependence upon God.
If the tongue cannot finally be mastered by human strength alone, then we need God to transform the **spring from which our words flow**.
We need Him to change the heart.
Because when the heart increasingly belongs to Christ, the speech that flows from it should increasingly begin to sound like Christ.
Not perfect.
Not incapable of correction.
Not unwilling to speak difficult truth.
But increasingly marked by:
grace, truth, patience, mercy, and love.

Perhaps that is one of the most practical measures of spiritual maturity James has given us.
Not simply:
What do I believe?
But:
What does what I believe sound like when I speak to other people?

Something Worth Pondering

James has moved us from the **power of the tongue** to the **source of our speech**.
The question is no longer merely:
Can I control what I say?
The deeper question is:
What do my words reveal about what is happening within me?
And perhaps an even more uncomfortable question follows:
If someone listened only to the way I speak about other people—especially the people who frustrate me—would they recognize that I believe those people were made in the likeness of God?
James's warning is severe because our words matter.
They can direct like a rudder.
They can wound like poison.
They can consume like fire.
But the same tongue can also pray.
It can encourage.
It can teach.
It can comfort.
It can confess.
It can forgive.
It can proclaim the Gospel.
And it can bless the Lord and Father.
The tongue James describes as capable of terrible destruction can also become an extraordinary instrument of grace when surrendered to God.
A sentence can wound someone for years.
But a sentence can also give hope to someone who has almost lost it.
A word can destroy confidence.
But a word can also restore courage.
A tongue can spread gossip through a congregation.
But that same tongue can speak reconciliation into division.
It can tell someone:
"I forgive you."
"I was wrong."
"I am sorry."
"You are not alone."

“God has not forgotten you.”
And perhaps therein lies the hopeful side of James's warning.
The question James places before us is not whether the tongue possesses power.
It does.
The question is:
What will we allow that power to become in the hands of God?

Ask Yourself This

Do the words I use about other people reflect the fact that they are made in the likeness of God—or do my words sometimes bless God with one breath and diminish His image with the next?

A Closer Look

James 3:6 — The Tongue Is a Fire

“And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell.”
— James 3:6, KJV
James has already prepared us for this moment.
The tongue is small.
Like the bit in a horse's mouth.
Like the rudder of a ship.
Yet something small can exercise enormous influence over something much larger.
Then, at the end of verse 5, James changes the image:
“Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!”
And now he says plainly:
“And the tongue is a fire.”
James is no longer talking merely about influence.
He is talking about **destruction**.
A bit controls.
A rudder directs.
But a fire, once released, can become something its starter can no longer control.
That makes fire an extraordinarily appropriate image for human speech.
A person can strike a match and decide where the flame begins.
He cannot always decide where the fire ends.
And we can choose to speak a word.
We cannot always choose what happens after someone hears it.

1. “And the Tongue Is a Fire”

Fire is not inherently evil.
It can warm a home.
It can prepare food.
It can provide light.
Under control, fire can accomplish enormous good.
But fire outside its proper boundaries becomes destructive.
There is something similar about the tongue.
The same tongue James condemns in this passage can be used to pray.
To teach.
To comfort.
To encourage.
To confess.

To forgive.
To proclaim the Gospel.
To tell another person, **“I love you.”**
The problem is not that human beings possess the power of speech.
Speech is a gift.
The problem is what happens when that gift is surrendered to anger, pride, jealousy, resentment, cruelty, or selfish ambition.
Then the fire escapes its boundaries.
And once words have been released, we discover something painful about them:
Words cannot always be recalled simply because we regret having spoken them.
We can apologize.
We can ask forgiveness.
We can explain what we meant.
We can try to repair the damage.
And sometimes relationships are beautifully restored.
But an apology cannot make the other person *unhear* what was said.
There is no delete key for a spoken sentence.
Perhaps that is why James chooses fire.
A spark may last only an instant.
Its consequences may last much longer.

2. “A World of Iniquity”

James then uses startling language:
“The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity.”
The tongue is only one small part of the body, yet James describes it as though an entire world of wrongdoing can find expression through it.
Consider how many sins can involve words.
We lie.
We gossip.
We slander.
We boast.
We deceive.
We manipulate.
We insult.
We flatter dishonestly.
We accuse falsely.
We complain.
We humiliate.
We speak with contempt.
We reveal what was told to us in confidence.
We distort another person's words.

We sometimes tell the truth in ways deliberately calculated to cause pain.
And occasionally we commit perhaps the most subtle sin of speech:
we say something technically true for an unrighteous reason.
That is an important distinction.
A statement does not automatically become righteous merely because it is factually correct.
Truth can be spoken in love.
Truth can also be used as ammunition.
We can reveal another person's failure not because anyone needs to know it, but because telling it makes us feel superior.
We can disguise gossip as concern.
We can disguise cruelty as honesty.
We can disguise pride as correction.
We can even disguise condemnation as righteousness.
James therefore does not permit us to evaluate our speech merely by asking:
"Was it true?"
We must also ask:
"Why did I say it?"
The tongue can become the instrument through which much of what is hidden within the heart enters the world.
Perhaps that is part of what makes it a **"world of iniquity."**

3. "It Defileth the whole body"

James next says the tongue:
"defileth the whole body."
Something very small can contaminate something much larger.
James has already shown us that principle with the bit and rudder.
Now he applies it morally.
Our speech can affect far more than a momentary conversation.
It can affect our character.
Our relationships.
Our witness.
Our families.
Our churches.
Our workplaces.
Our reputations.
A person may be known for generosity, faithfulness, intelligence, hard work, or Christian service, yet destructive speech can cast a shadow across all of it.
This is particularly sobering in the context with which James began the chapter:
"Be not many masters…"

Those who teach the faith do so primarily through words.
That gives words enormous potential for good.
But it also gives them enormous potential for harm.
A teacher can use words to illuminate Scripture.
A pastor can use words to comfort someone who is grieving.
A Christian can use words to lead someone toward Christ.
But words can also distort Scripture, manipulate people, divide congregations, or wound those entrusted to our care.
The instrument through which much ministry occurs is the very instrument James warns can **"stain the whole body."**
No wonder teachers are judged with greater strictness.

4. "Sets on Fire the Cycle of Nature"

Then James uses one of the more difficult expressions in the passage: **"sets on fire the cycle of nature."**
The underlying expression carries the idea of the **course or cycle of life**—the ongoing movement of human existence.
James's point appears to be that destructive speech does not merely damage isolated moments.
It can set an entire life ablaze.
We see how easily this can happen.
One rumor leads to another.
One insult produces another.
One accusation demands a response.
One angry exchange becomes a feud.
One family disagreement survives into another generation.
One dispute within a church creates factions whose members may eventually forget what the original disagreement was even about.
Words produce responses.
Responses produce more words.
And the fire spreads.
Sometimes the person who began it is no longer capable of stopping it.
That makes James's warning remarkably relevant in every generation.
And in our own time, words can travel farther and faster than James could possibly have imagined.
A sentence once spoken to a handful of people can now be written and placed before hundreds, thousands, or millions within moments.
A careless comment can be copied.
Forwarded.
Shared.
Quoted.
Preserved.

And long after the speaker wishes it would disappear, the words may remain.
The technology has changed.
James's warning has not.
A small fire can still burn a great forest.

5. “And Is Itself Set on Fire by Hell”

Then James takes us to the darkest phrase in the verse:
“and is itself set on fire by hell.”
The word translated **“hell”** is *Gehenna*.
That word carries a much stronger meaning than merely saying that careless speech has unfortunate consequences.
James traces destructive speech to a spiritual source opposed to God.
The fire does not merely spread outward.
James asks us to consider **where the fire came from in the first place.**
This does not mean that every careless sentence is the result of direct demonic activity, nor does James give us permission to blame Satan for words we ourselves choose to speak.
James has already been very clear about personal responsibility.
Earlier he wrote:
“One is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it.”
James does not allow us to say:
“The devil made me do it.”
Our words are ours.
We remain responsible for them.
But James does recognize that destructive speech belongs to a pattern of evil fundamentally opposed to God's purposes.
God creates.
The uncontrolled tongue destroys.
God reconciles.
The uncontrolled tongue divides.
God speaks truth.
The uncontrolled tongue deceives.
God gives grace.
The uncontrolled tongue condemns.
God brings life.
The uncontrolled tongue can leave devastation behind it.
And James will soon make this contrast even clearer when he distinguishes between wisdom **“from above”** and wisdom that is *“earthly, sensual, devilish.”*
There are two very different directions in which a human life can move.
And our words may reveal which direction is influencing us.

6. The Fire Usually Begins Small

There is one final feature of James's image that deserves attention.
Forest fires rarely begin as forest fires.
They begin as sparks.
Something small.
Something that might have been extinguished easily at the beginning.
So do many conflicts.
A misunderstanding.
A sarcastic remark.
An impatient response.
A confidence repeated to one person.
A sentence spoken in frustration.
A suspicion presented as fact.
And sometimes we recognize the danger almost immediately.
There is that brief moment when conscience says:
Don't say it.
Perhaps wisdom means learning to listen carefully to that moment.
Because once the spark leaves us, the situation changes.
Before the word is spoken, we control whether it enters the world.
Afterward, we may have very little control over where it goes.
There are times when the most Christlike thing we can say is something courageous and difficult.
There are also times when the most Christlike thing we can say is:
nothing at all.

Pastoral Reflection

James 3:6 should make every Christian uncomfortable.
It certainly should make every teacher and pastor uncomfortable.
Those of us who teach Scripture depend upon words.
We preach with them.
We counsel with them.
We pray with them.
We comfort with them.
We explain God's Word with them.
And because words are the tools of ministry, it can become easy to forget that those same tools can wound the people we have been called to serve.
Sometimes the most damaging words are not shouted.
They are spoken calmly.
Sometimes they are spoken from a pulpit.
Sometimes they are spoken in a church meeting.
Sometimes they are spoken privately about someone who is not present to defend himself or herself.
Sometimes they are spoken with a Bible verse attached.

James reminds us that religious language does not automatically make our speech righteous.
Before speaking—especially when angry, hurt, or convinced that we are right—it may be worth asking:
Am I trying to bring light to this situation, or am I about to start a fire?
There is also grace hidden within James's warning.
Fire can be stopped.
Relationships can be restored.
Forgiveness can be sought.
Patterns of destructive speech can change.
But that transformation begins with honesty.
We must first recognize the spark.
Then we must be willing to surrender not merely our mouths, but the hearts that supply them, to God.

Something Worth Pondering

James does not tell us that the tongue merely *resembles* fire.
He says:
"The tongue is a fire."
That should make us think carefully about the enormous power contained in ordinary words.
Every day we carry within us the ability to encourage or discourage, heal or wound, reconcile or divide, bless or curse.
And much of that power can be released in a single sentence.
Perhaps spiritual maturity sometimes begins in the brief space between feeling something and saying something.
A moment in which we ask:
Does this need to be said?
Does it need to be said by me?
Does it need to be said now?
And can I say it in a way that reflects Christ?
Because once the spark has left our lips, we may no longer control the fire.

Ask Yourself This

When anger, frustration, or hurt places a spark on my tongue, do I give it to God before I speak—or do I sometimes discover only afterward how much a few words can burn?

A Closer Look

James 3:7 — Taming Living Creatures

“For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind:”
— James 3:7, KJV

After the severity of verse 6, James changes the picture completely.
We have moved from **fire and destruction** to the created world.
Beasts.
Birds.
Reptiles.
Sea creatures.
At first glance, verse 7 may seem almost like a pause in the argument.
It is not.
James is building a contrast.
Human beings have demonstrated an extraordinary ability to bring powerful and sometimes dangerous creatures under control.
A horse can be trained.
A bird can be taught.
Wild animals can be subdued.
Creatures from nearly every part of the created order have, in one way or another, been brought under human influence.
James summarizes it broadly:
“can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species.”
His point is not to give us a scientific inventory of domesticated animals.
His point is to remind us of **human capability**.
We are remarkably good at mastering things outside ourselves.
And that is precisely what makes the next verse so uncomfortable.

1. Humanity and the Created Order

James's language reaches back toward the biblical picture of humanity's relationship with creation.
Human beings were given a unique place within God's created order.
We possess intelligence, language, creativity, memory, planning, and the ability to shape our environment in ways no other creature does.
We build.
We cultivate.
We train.
We organize.
We invent tools.
We harness natural forces.

We learn how animals behave and then use that understanding to guide them.
James's readers would have understood this easily.
A horse stronger than the person riding it could still be directed.
An ox vastly more powerful than the farmer could still be harnessed.
Animals that might otherwise be dangerous could be trained to respond to human commands.
The physical strength of the animal was not the decisive issue.
Control was.
And there is an irony here that James wants us to feel.
The creature capable of controlling so much of the world around it is still unable fully to control something within itself.

2. We Are Better at Mastering the Outside Than the Inside

That may be one of the quiet truths behind verse 7.
Human beings are often remarkably capable when the problem is external.
Give us a difficult landscape, and we build roads through it.
Give us a river, and we bridge it.
Give us a disease, and we study it.
Give us a machine, and we learn how it works.
Give us a wild animal, and sooner or later someone figures out how to train it.
We are problem solvers.
Yet some of the most difficult problems are not outside us at all.
Pride.
Anger.
Envy.
Resentment.
Fear.
Impulsiveness.
And, in James's immediate concern:
the tongue.
We can sometimes solve extremely complicated technical problems while still being defeated by one poorly chosen sentence.
We can manage organizations, lead teams, teach classes, repair machinery, design systems, and make difficult decisions.
Then one angry conversation reveals how much of ourselves remains untamed.
James's contrast is humbling because it exposes the limits of intelligence alone.
Knowing more does not automatically make us wiser.

Being capable does not automatically make us mature.
Having authority does not automatically give us self-control.
A person may be highly competent in nearly every outward area of life and still be spiritually undisciplined in speech.

3. The Irony of Strength

There is another important idea beneath James's example.
Many of the animals humanity has tamed are stronger than the people controlling them.
The horse is stronger than the rider.
The ox is stronger than the farmer.
Yet physical power does not necessarily determine who is in control.
The same principle applies to the tongue.
The tongue itself is physically weak.
It is one of the smallest members of the body.
Yet James has already shown us that its influence is enormous.
Once again, size and strength are not the issue.
Direction and control are.
This is why the examples of the bit, rudder, fire, and now animals all belong together.
James keeps returning to the same truth from different directions:
Something can be small and still possess tremendous power.
Something can be strong and still be brought under control.
And something can appear insignificant while remaining dangerously untamed.

4. “Has Been Tamed”

James does not speak hypothetically.
He says these creatures:
“can be tamed and have been tamed.”
Humanity has a history of doing this successfully.
That makes his argument stronger.
He is not saying:
Perhaps human beings might eventually learn to control powerful creatures.
He is saying:
We already have.
Again and again.
Across generations.
Across cultures.
Across different kinds of animals.
Human ingenuity has repeatedly demonstrated that creatures once feared can be trained, harnessed, directed, or controlled.
Then verse 8 will deliver the contrast:

“but the tongue can no man tame.”
James deliberately sets human achievement beside human limitation.
And the result should humble us.

5. The Danger of Thinking Competence Equals Character

Verse 7 also offers a useful warning for people who are accustomed to being capable.
Some of us spend much of life solving problems.
People bring us things because they expect us to know what to do.
We become comfortable with competence.
We learn that enough knowledge, patience, experience, and discipline can usually bring a problem under control.
That works quite well with machinery.
It works with systems.
It often works with organizations.
It can even work with animals.
But spiritual formation is different.
We cannot simply engineer holiness.
We cannot troubleshoot pride as though it were a failed circuit.
We cannot rewrite a procedure and assume anger will disappear.
We cannot create a checklist that guarantees gracious speech.
Discipline matters greatly.
But James is preparing us to recognize that **self-control ultimately requires more than self-confidence.**
It requires dependence upon God.
That is where verse 7 leads.
Not toward admiration of human ability.
But toward recognition of human limitation.

Pastoral Reflection

There is something deeply humbling about James's comparison.
We often take pride in what human beings can accomplish.
And rightly so, to a point.
God has given humanity extraordinary gifts of reason, creativity, and skill.
But James reminds us that external mastery does not necessarily mean internal maturity.
A person can be brilliant and cruel.
Successful and arrogant.
Highly educated and careless with words.
Respected publicly and destructive privately.
Even in ministry, competence can sometimes hide character problems.

A gifted preacher may still speak harshly.
A knowledgeable teacher may still humiliate others.
A strong leader may still use words to control rather than serve.
James refuses to let outward ability become a substitute for inward transformation.
Perhaps one of the marks of spiritual maturity is recognizing that our greatest challenges are not always the ones outside us.
Sometimes the most difficult creature we will ever be asked to bring under obedience is:
ourselves.

Something Worth Pondering

James 3:7 gives humanity considerable credit.
We have learned to master remarkable things.
But James is not impressed with achievement for its own sake.
He is preparing us for a far more personal question.
What good is it to control the world around us if we cannot control the words that come from within us?
We can train powerful animals.
We can harness forces far greater than ourselves.
We can solve problems that once seemed impossible.
But spiritual maturity is measured differently.
It asks not merely:
What am I capable of controlling?
but:
What within me still refuses to come under God's control?

Ask Yourself This

Am I more skilled at managing the people, problems, and circumstances around me than I am at allowing God to govern what happens within me—especially what comes out of my mouth?

A Closer Look

James 3:8 — The Tongue Can No Man Tame

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

— James 3:8, KJV

Verse 7 celebrated an extraordinary human achievement.

Human beings have learned to tame creatures from throughout the animal kingdom.

Then James gives us two words that overturn the entire picture:

“but no one…”

There is the contrast.

We can tame the creature outside us.

We cannot completely tame the tongue within us.

James has deliberately led us here.

The horse can be controlled by a bit.

The ship can be controlled by a rudder.

Animals stronger and more dangerous than ourselves can be trained.

Yet the tongue remains:

“an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.”

James's argument is becoming increasingly personal.

The greatest danger is no longer the horse, the storm, the forest fire, or the wild animal.

The danger is within us.

1. “But The tongue can no man tame”

At first, James's statement seems almost hopeless.

If no one can tame the tongue, then why has James spent so much time warning us about our speech?

Why tell us to control something that cannot be controlled?

James cannot mean that Christians bear no responsibility for what they say.

He has already told us:

“Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.”

He has also warned that those who do not *“bridle their tongues”* deceive their own hearts.

Clearly James expects Christians to exercise discipline over their speech.

So what does he mean?

The distinction seems to lie in the word **tame**.

James is not saying that the tongue cannot be restrained.

He is saying that it cannot be made permanently harmless through human effort.

A wild animal that has been thoroughly tamed can become predictable.
The tongue never becomes so safe that we can stop guarding it.
No Christian reaches a point of spiritual maturity at which he or she can say:
“My speech is no longer something I need to watch.”
Perhaps that is precisely the danger.
The moment we believe the tongue has been conquered may be the moment we become careless with it.
James calls us not to confidence in our mastery, but to continuing vigilance and dependence upon God.

2. The Limits of Self-Control

There is an important difference between **self-control** and **self-sufficiency**.
James certainly values self-control.
But he never teaches self-sufficiency.
The Christian life is not a project in which we gradually become so disciplined that we no longer need God's grace.
Quite the opposite.
The more honestly we know ourselves, the more clearly we recognize how deeply we need God.
That is especially true of speech.
Most of us can control our tongues reasonably well when everything is going our way.
It becomes more difficult when we are:
angry,
embarrassed,
hurt,
afraid,
exhausted,
criticized,
or convinced that we have been treated unfairly.
Those moments expose the difference between outward restraint and inward transformation.
We may have learned what Christians are supposed to say.
But pressure sometimes reveals what is actually within us.
And James has already warned us that temptation does not merely come from somewhere outside ourselves.
Our own desires can lure and entice us.
The same principle applies here.
The tongue does not manufacture the entire problem.
It gives the problem a voice.
Pride finds words.

Anger finds words.
Jealousy finds words.
Bitterness finds words.
Fear finds words.
Love also finds words.
Grace finds words.
Mercy finds words.
What comes through the mouth often tells us something about what has been allowed to live within the heart.

3. “An unruly evil”

James describes the tongue as:
“an unruly evil.”
The image is unsettling.
Something restless does not remain quietly in its place.
It moves.
It searches.
It waits for opportunity.
The tongue can be like that.
A thought enters the mind, and almost immediately we feel the urge to say it.
Someone tells us something confidential, and suddenly we feel the temptation to tell someone else.
Someone criticizes us, and a response forms before they have even finished speaking.
Someone wounds us, and the perfect retaliatory sentence appears almost instantly.
Someone fails, and we discover how easy it is to discuss that failure with another person.
The tongue is restless because it is always ready.
Ready to defend.
Ready to retaliate.
Ready to impress.
Ready to complain.
Ready to explain.
Ready to prove that we were right.
And sometimes wisdom consists not in finding the right words, but in recognizing that **no words are required at all.**
James has already told us to be:
“quick to listen, slow to speak.”
Perhaps one reason we must be *slow to speak* is that the tongue itself is so eager to be quick.

4. The Tongue and Anger

There is a particularly strong connection between James's teaching here and his earlier warning about anger.

James wrote:

“your anger does not produce God's righteousness.”

That becomes very practical when we consider the tongue.

Anger has a remarkable ability to convince us that whatever we are about to say is justified.

We tell ourselves:

“Someone needs to say it.”

“They deserve to hear this.”

“I'm only telling the truth.”

Perhaps.

But James asks us to consider whether the words produced by our anger are actually producing the righteousness of God.

There are times when anger is appropriate.

There are times when wrongdoing must be confronted.

There are times when silence would be cowardice rather than wisdom.

But righteous concern and destructive speech are not the same thing.

We can confront without humiliating.

We can disagree without belittling.

We can correct without enjoying another person's embarrassment.

We can speak truth without using truth as a weapon.

The restless tongue wants immediate release.

Wisdom asks:

What will these words accomplish?

5. “Full of Deadly Poison”

James now adds another image:

“full of deadly poison.”

In verse 6 the tongue was **fire**.

Fire burns.

Now the tongue is filled with **poison**.

Poison works differently.

Fire may destroy dramatically and visibly.

Poison may work quietly.

Slowly.

Internally.

Sometimes the damage caused by words is immediate.

A friendship ends.

An argument erupts.

A congregation divides.

A family relationship fractures.

That is fire.
But other words work like poison.
They remain within a person.
A child repeatedly told:
“You'll never amount to anything.”
A spouse repeatedly made to feel inadequate.
An employee continually humiliated.
A church member made to believe that he or she is unwanted.
A person mocked repeatedly for a weakness or failure.
Those words may not produce an immediate visible reaction.
But they can settle deeply into the heart.
Years later, the speaker may not even remember saying them.
The hearer may remember every word.
That is poison.

6. Poison Can Be Administered in Small Doses

There is another disturbing quality about poison.
It does not always require a large amount.
Neither does destructive speech.
Sometimes we imagine that harmful speech must involve shouting, profanity, or obvious cruelty.
Not necessarily.
A raised eyebrow accompanied by a few carefully chosen words can damage someone's reputation.
A subtle insinuation can plant suspicion.
A sarcastic remark can humiliate.
A half-truth can mislead.
A sentence beginning:
“I'm not supposed to tell anyone this, but…”
can become the beginning of gossip that travels through an entire community.
And perhaps one of the most dangerous forms of poison is speech that sounds innocent enough to allow us to deny responsibility afterward.
“I was only joking.”
“I didn't mean anything by it.”
“I was just telling you what I heard.”
“I was only being honest.”
James asks us to look beyond the excuse and examine the fruit.
Did the words heal?
Did they clarify?
Did they correct?
Did they restore?
Or did they poison?

7. Words Can Poison Communities

James is writing to communities of believers, so his warning cannot be limited to individual relationships.
A restless tongue can affect an entire church.
Gossip creates suspicion.
Suspicion creates factions.
Factions create division.
Division damages fellowship.
And eventually a congregation can find itself consumed by conflict that began with only a few words.
The same can happen within families.
Workplaces.
Friendships.
Communities.
Once again James's imagery from verse 6 returns.
A spark becomes a fire.
And now we see another possibility:
A small dose becomes poison circulating through the whole body.
That is why seemingly insignificant words deserve serious spiritual attention.

8. If No One Can Tame It, Where Is the Hope?

James's statement leaves us with an unavoidable question.
If:
"the tongue can no man tame,"
where is the hope?
The answer is not found in giving up.
It is found in recognizing **who must do the transforming**.
James has already told us:
"Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above."
He has told us to:
"welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls."
And later in this chapter he will describe:
"the wisdom from above."
James repeatedly directs us toward what comes **from God**.
Human discipline can restrain the tongue.
Wisdom can teach us when to remain silent.
Experience can teach us the consequences of careless words.
Repentance can make us more cautious.
All of these things matter.
But Christianity is not merely a program of behavior modification.
God does not simply teach us to speak differently.

He changes the person who is speaking.
As the heart is transformed, the words should increasingly reflect that transformation.
The tongue remains something that must be guarded.
But it can increasingly become an instrument of grace rather than destruction.

Pastoral Reflection

There is something strangely comforting in James's bluntness.
"The tongue can no man tame."
James includes all of us.
The pastor.
The teacher.
The mature Christian.
The new believer.
The person who has walked with God for fifty years.
None of us graduates from the need to guard our speech.
That should produce humility.
It should also produce grace toward one another.
Christians will sometimes say things they regret.
Pastors will sometimes choose the wrong words.
Friends will misunderstand one another.
Spouses will occasionally speak from frustration rather than love.
When that happens, James does not invite us to pretend the words did not matter.
They did.
But the Gospel gives us ways forward.
We can confess.
We can apologize without qualification.
We can forgive.
We can seek reconciliation.
And we can ask God to continue transforming the heart from which our words emerge.
Sometimes three of the hardest words for the restless tongue to speak are also among the most healing:
"I was wrong."
And three more:
"Please forgive me."
Perhaps a tongue that cannot be perfectly tamed can nevertheless learn, through grace, to become increasingly humble.

Something Worth Pondering

The tongue James describes is never completely safe.
That means guarding our speech is not something we accomplish once.

It is part of a lifetime of discipleship.
We will always need wisdom.
We will always need humility.
We will always need restraint.
We will always need grace.
And we will always need God.
Perhaps the goal is not to reach the point where we can confidently say:
"I have mastered my tongue."
Perhaps spiritual maturity sounds more like:
"Lord, I know what my tongue is capable of. Help me surrender it to You again today."
Because the tongue that James calls:
"an unruly evil, full of deadly poison"
can, under the transforming work of God, become the tongue that speaks encouragement to the discouraged, truth to the confused, forgiveness to the repentant, comfort to the grieving, reconciliation to the divided, and the Gospel to those who need hope.
The tongue remains powerful.
The question is increasingly becoming:
Who governs that power?

Ask Yourself This

When my tongue becomes restless—eager to defend myself, retaliate, repeat something I have heard, or prove that I am right—have I learned to recognize that moment as an invitation to surrender my words to God before I speak?

A Closer Look

James 3:9 — Blessing God and Cursing People

“Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God.”
— James 3:9, KJV

James has described the tongue as fire.
He has called it *“a world of iniquity.”*
He has said that it stains the whole body, sets the course of life ablaze, and is itself set on fire by Gehenna.
He has compared humanity's ability to tame the created world with our inability fully to tame our own tongues.
And he has called the tongue:
“an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.”
But now James does something different.
He takes us to **worship**.
“Therewith bless we God, even the Father…”
The tongue James has been warning us about is also the tongue with which we praise God.
We pray with it.
We confess our faith with it.
We read Scripture with it.
We sing hymns with it.
We proclaim God's goodness with it.
We say:
“Praise the Lord.”
“Thanks be to God.”
“Amen.”
And there is nothing wrong with any of those things.
Quite the opposite.
The human voice was made capable of praising its Creator.
But James sees a terrible contradiction.
The same tongue that blesses God can turn toward another human being and curse.
And James wants us to understand why that contradiction is so serious.

1. “We Bless God, even the Father”

Notice the way James describes God:
“God, even the Father.”
God is the One whom we worship as Lord.
He is also the One whom we know as Father.

That makes the contradiction James is about to expose particularly painful.
We gather with God's people and address Him as Father.
Then we leave worship and speak contemptuously about another member of the human family.
We acknowledge God's authority with our mouths while using those same mouths in ways inconsistent with His character.
This means James is not merely teaching us proper manners.
He is talking about the integrity of our worship.
What we say about God and what we say about people cannot be completely separated.
The God we worship is the God who created the person standing in front of us.

2. “And With It We Curse People”

The contrast is deliberately sharp.
Bless.
Curse.
James does not allow much comfortable territory between them.
To bless is to speak well, to praise, to invoke good.
To curse is to speak against another—to wish evil upon them, condemn them, or use words that diminish and degrade.
We may be tempted to distance ourselves from James's warning by thinking:
“I have never literally pronounced a curse on anyone.”
Perhaps not.
But James's principle reaches considerably farther than a formal curse.
What happens when we speak about another person with contempt?
When we ridicule them?
When we deliberately humiliate them?
When we spread something damaging about them because we want others to think less of them?
When we secretly enjoy describing their failures?
When we reduce an entire human being to the worst thing they have ever done?
We may never say:
“I curse you.”
Yet our words can still communicate:
“You are beneath me.”
And James will not permit Christians to speak that way comfortably.

3. “Made after the similitude of God”

Here James gives the reason.
People are:

“made after the similitude of God.”
James reaches all the way back to the opening chapter of Genesis.
Human dignity does not begin with intelligence.
It does not begin with achievement.
It does not depend upon wealth.
Education.
Nationality.
Social position.
Usefulness.
Political agreement.
Moral perfection.
Or whether we happen to like someone.
Human dignity begins with **God**.
The person before us possesses value because God created human beings in His likeness.
That changes the way James expects Christians to speak.
Because when we attack another person's humanity, we are speaking about someone who bears the mark of the Creator we claim to worship.
This does not mean that human beings are divine.
Nor does it mean that sin somehow ceases to matter.
James certainly does not avoid confronting sin.
But sin does not erase the image of God.
Human beings may distort that image.
We may live in ways completely contrary to God's will.
We may hurt one another terribly.
We may require correction.
We may need accountability.
There may even be circumstances in which justice requires serious consequences.
But none of those things makes another person **less human**.
And therefore none gives us permission to treat that person as though the image of God has disappeared.

4. The Person We Disagree With Bears God's Image

This becomes particularly difficult when James's teaching moves from theology into ordinary life.
It is easy to affirm:
“Human beings are created in the image of God.”
It becomes harder when the human being in question has just made us angry.
The coworker who frustrates us bears God's image.
The neighbor who irritates us bears God's image.

The church member who disagrees with us bears God's image.
The person whose opinions seem completely wrong to us bears God's image.
The person who speaks harshly about us bears God's image.
And, most difficult of all:
The person who has genuinely wronged us still bears God's image.
That does not mean we must approve of what they have done.
It does not mean reconciliation is always immediately possible.
It does not mean boundaries are unnecessary.
It does not mean justice should be abandoned.
It means that even when we must confront someone's behavior, we are confronting **a human being whom God created**.
That should affect the way we speak.

5. Correction Is Not the Same as Contempt

This distinction is especially important.
Christian speech does not require us to pretend that everything everyone does is acceptable.
James certainly doesn't.
Throughout this letter he speaks plainly about sin, partiality, selfish ambition, destructive speech, arrogance, oppression, and wandering from the truth.
There is nothing timid about James.
But there is an important difference between **correction** and **contempt**.
Correction says:
"What you have done is wrong."
Contempt says:
"You are worthless."
Correction seeks truth.
Contempt seeks superiority.
Correction may sometimes require strong words.
Contempt enjoys using them.
Correction can still recognize God's image in the person being corrected.
Contempt forgets it.
That distinction should matter greatly within the Church.
Christians will disagree.
Pastors will sometimes need to confront.
Teachers will sometimes need to correct.
Churches will sometimes need to address difficult behavior.
But James gives us no permission to strip another person of dignity while doing so.
We can oppose what is wrong without denying the worth of the person who is wrong.

6. The Sunday Morning Contradiction

James's example becomes painfully practical when we imagine the rhythm of worship.
On Sunday morning we sing:
“Holy, holy, holy.”
We pray.
We praise God.
We hear Scripture.
We bless:
“God, even the Father.”
Then perhaps before we even leave the church building, we begin talking about someone else.
Maybe it happens in the hallway.
Perhaps in the parking lot.
Perhaps over lunch.
The voice that praised God an hour earlier now describes another person with ridicule, resentment, or contempt.
James sees the contradiction immediately.
How can the mouth that honors the Creator casually dishonor someone who bears the Creator's likeness?
This does not mean that worship becomes invalid every time a Christian later speaks badly.
If that were true, none of us could worship.
James's point is not perfection.
It is **integrity**.
The worship offered by our mouths should increasingly shape the words that come from those mouths everywhere else.
The tongue should not belong to God for an hour on Sunday and return to us for the remainder of the week.

7. Worship Continues After the Benediction

Perhaps James is quietly expanding our understanding of worship.
Worship does not end when the final hymn is sung.
The way we speak afterward may reveal whether worship has begun transforming us.
If we call God **Father**, then His fatherhood must influence the way we regard His human creatures.
If we call Jesus **Lord**, then His lordship extends to our speech.
If we praise God for His mercy, then mercy should increasingly appear in the way we speak about others.
If we thank God for forgiving us, then remembering our own need for forgiveness should make it harder to speak self-righteously about someone else's failure.

There is something deeply inconsistent about receiving grace from God while refusing even basic dignity to another person.
James wants the language of worship and the language of daily life to come from the same transformed heart.

8. The Image of God Changes the Conversation

Imagine what might happen if, during a difficult conversation, we silently reminded ourselves:
This person bears the likeness of God.
Before responding to an insult:
This person bears the likeness of God.
Before repeating gossip:
This person bears the likeness of God.
Before writing the angry message:
This person bears the likeness of God.
Before describing someone we strongly dislike:
This person bears the likeness of God.
That reminder does not solve every disagreement.
It does not tell us that the other person is right.
It does not require us to remain silent about wrongdoing.
But it changes the **posture** from which we speak.
Suddenly the question is no longer merely:
"What does this person deserve to hear from me?"
It becomes:
"How can I speak truthfully to or about someone who belongs to the humanity God created in His likeness?"
That is a much more demanding question.

Pastoral Reflection

For pastors and teachers, James's words are particularly sobering.
We spend a great deal of time using our tongues to bless God.
We preach.
We pray.
We teach Scripture.
We pronounce blessings.
We counsel.
We speak of grace.
And because our public words may sound very Christian, it can become easy to overlook what our private words sound like.
How do we speak about the difficult church member after the meeting?
How do we speak about someone who criticized the sermon?
How do we speak about another pastor?
How do we speak about someone whose theology differs from ours?
How do we speak about someone after they have disappointed us?

The pulpit does not sanctify the tongue.
Neither does a title.
Neither does theological education.
Neither does years of ministry.
James has already warned teachers that words carry greater responsibility.
Verse 9 reminds us that the people about whom those words are spoken carry **God-given dignity**.
And that applies to every Christian.
Perhaps before we speak about someone, we should occasionally imagine that person standing beside the God whose image they bear.
Would we still say it?
Would we say it the same way?

Something Worth Pondering

There is an uncomfortable symmetry in James 3:9.
We look upward and bless God.
Then we look sideways and curse someone made in God's likeness.
James refuses to allow those two directions to remain disconnected.
Our relationship with God must eventually affect our relationship with people.
Our theology must eventually reach our tongues.
Our worship must eventually reach our conversations.
Perhaps one of the clearest signs that worship is changing us is that we begin seeing God's image in people in whom it is hardest for us to see.
Not because they have earned our approval.
Not because everything they do is right.
But because their dignity ultimately rests not in **who they have become**, but in **the God who created them**.

Ask Yourself This

When I speak about the person I find most difficult to love, would someone listening to me know that I believe that person was made in the likeness of God?

A Closer Look

James 3:10 — Blessing and Cursing from the Same Mouth

“Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be.”
— James 3:10, KJV
Verse 10 continues the thought James began in verse 9.
There he identified the contradiction:
“Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God.”
Now James strips the matter down to its simplest form:
“Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing.”
The problem is not that the tongue lacks the ability to do good.
Quite the opposite.
The tongue can bless.
It can praise God.
It can encourage another person.
It can teach truth.
It can offer comfort.
It can confess sin.
It can ask forgiveness.
It can proclaim the Gospel.
The tragedy is that the same mouth capable of all those things can also wound, humiliate, deceive, condemn, gossip, slander, and curse.
And James says plainly:
“These things ought not so to be.”
There may be few sentences in James that are simpler than this one.
But there may also be few that are more demanding.

1. “From the Same Mouth…”

James emphasizes the source.
Not two mouths.
Not two different people.
The same mouth.
That is what makes the contradiction so disturbing.
If one person blessed God and another cursed people, there would certainly still be sin to address.
But James is describing something happening within **one person**.
The same person worships and wounds.
The same person praises and belittles.
The same person speaks of grace and then speaks without grace.

The same person thanks God for mercy and then refuses mercy to someone else.
James is confronting the divided nature of our speech.
And that fits a concern running throughout his letter.
James has little patience for a faith that exists in separate compartments.
We cannot hear the Word without doing it.
We cannot claim faith while ignoring works.
We cannot honor the rich while humiliating the poor.
And now:
We cannot bless God while treating speech about His image-bearers as though it has nothing to do with our faith.
For James, discipleship is meant to produce an integrated life.
What we believe, what we do, and what we say belong together.

2. Blessing and Cursing

James deliberately places these opposites beside one another.
Blessing.
Cursing.
One gives honor.
The other tears down.
One acknowledges worth.
The other diminishes it.
One is consistent with love.
The other grows from contempt.
And both can emerge from the same mouth.
Perhaps we are tempted to soften James's language because *cursing* sounds extreme.
Most Christians probably do not walk around formally pronouncing curses on people.
But verse 9 has already shown us the deeper issue.
James is concerned with speech that dishonors those who are made in God's likeness.
That can happen in much more ordinary ways.
A cruel joke.
A sarcastic insult.
A damaging rumor.
A contemptuous nickname.
A private conversation designed to lower someone in another person's estimation.
An angry sentence intended not merely to correct, but to hurt.
Even silence can sometimes participate when we knowingly allow a false or damaging statement about another person to stand because it serves our purposes.

The vocabulary may change.
The spiritual problem does not.

3. “My brethren…”

Then James changes the tone slightly.
“My brethren…”
That matters.
James is not standing outside the Church shouting condemnation at strangers.
He is speaking to the family of faith.
These are people he loves.
People with whom he identifies.
People who worship the same God.
Notice also that James has not said:
“You people do this.”
His language in verse 9 was:
“With it we bless…”
and:
“with it we curse…”
James includes himself in the human problem.
Then he addresses them affectionately:
“My brethren…”
This is pastoral correction.
James does not minimize the seriousness of the sin.
But neither does he forget the relationship he has with the people he is correcting.
There is a lesson even in the way James confronts destructive speech.
He practices what he is teaching.
He speaks firmly without speaking contemptuously.
He corrects without dehumanizing.
He names the problem without treating the people as though they themselves are beyond grace.
That may be one of the most easily overlooked lessons in this verse.
Sometimes **how** we correct another person's speech reveals as much about our own tongue as the words we are correcting.

4. “These things ought not so to be”

James does not say:
“This is unfortunate.”
He does not say:
“Everyone does it.”
He does not say:
“Nobody is perfect.”
He says:

“These things ought not so to be.”
There is moral clarity in those words.
James understands human weakness.
He has just said that no one can tame the tongue.
But human weakness does not cause James to lower God's standard.
That is extremely important.
Verse 8:
“The tongue can no man tame.”
Verse 10:
“These things ought not so to be.”
Those statements must be held together.
The first prevents **pride**.
The second prevents **excuses**.
We cannot say:
“I have completely mastered my speech.”
James says we have not.
But neither can we say:
“Well, nobody can control the tongue, so what I said really isn't my responsibility.”
James will not allow that either.
“These things ought not so to be.”
Christian maturity lives somewhere between those two errors.
We recognize our weakness.
We accept responsibility.
We depend upon God's grace.
And we continue allowing Him to transform us.

5. Grace Does Not Make Sin Unimportant

There is a temptation within Christian life to misuse grace.
Because we know that God forgives, we can begin treating certain recurring sins casually.
Especially sins of speech.
We may say:
“I shouldn't have said that.”
Then move on.
Perhaps sometimes that is enough.
But sometimes it isn't.
If our words damaged someone, repentance may require more than privately admitting to God that we spoke wrongly.
We may need to go to the person.
We may need to apologize.
If we spread something false, we may need to correct it with the same people who heard it.

If we damaged someone's reputation publicly, a private apology alone may not repair the damage.
Grace forgives sin.
But grace also teaches us to take sin seriously enough to seek restoration where possible.
James's:
“These things ought not so to be”
is therefore not condemnation without hope.
It is an invitation to repentance and change.

6. James Refuses to Normalize the Contradiction

Perhaps one of the most powerful things about this verse is James's refusal to accept destructive speech simply because it is common.
Human beings have always spoken badly about one another.
Churches have always had disagreements.
Families have always argued.
Communities have always gossiped.
People have always said things they later regretted.
James knows that.
And still he says:
“These things ought not so to be.”
There is a difference between acknowledging that something commonly happens and deciding that it is acceptable.
Christians should be very careful about saying:
“That's just the way people are.”
Sometimes that statement may be accurate.
But the Gospel is concerned precisely with transforming **the way people are**.
Anger may be natural.
Pride may be natural.
Jealousy may be natural.
Retaliation may be natural.
Careless speech may be natural.
But James is describing life being reshaped by the wisdom of God.
The Christian question is not merely:
“Is this normal?”
It is:
“Is this consistent with the life to which Christ has called me?”
James answers that question about blessing and cursing unmistakably:
No.

7. The Tongue Reveals an Inconsistency in the Heart

Verses 11 and 12 will make James's argument even deeper.
He is about to ask whether the same spring can produce both fresh and brackish water.
Then he will ask whether a fig tree can produce olives or a grapevine figs.
Those illustrations tell us something important about verse 10.
James is moving from **speech to source**.
The problem is not merely that blessing and cursing happen to pass through the same mouth.
The deeper question is:
Why are both coming from the same person?
The mouth reveals something about what is happening within us.
That does not mean every foolish sentence perfectly represents our character.
We all say things we regret.
But patterns of speech deserve attention.
If bitterness repeatedly comes from my mouth, perhaps I need to ask whether bitterness has been growing in my heart.
If criticism constantly comes from my mouth, perhaps I should examine pride.
If gossip repeatedly attracts me, perhaps I should ask why another person's failure is so interesting to me.
If angry words repeatedly erupt, perhaps the problem is deeper than vocabulary.
Changing the words without examining the source can become little more than putting a lid on a spring.
James is interested in something deeper.
Transformation at the source.

8. The Christian Mouth Should Become Increasingly Consistent

James is not demanding instant perfection.
If he were, verse 8 would make no sense.
He is calling for increasing consistency.
The mouth that blesses God should increasingly become a mouth that blesses people.
The tongue that speaks of grace should increasingly become gracious.
The tongue that proclaims forgiveness should become quicker to forgive.
The tongue that confesses Jesus as Lord should increasingly submit itself to His lordship.
This is sanctification applied to speech.

Not perfection achieved overnight.
But a life increasingly brought into harmony with what we profess to believe.
There should be less contradiction today than yesterday.
Less cursing.
More blessing.
Less gossip.
More encouragement.
Less retaliation.
More restraint.
Less contempt.
More recognition of the image of God.
The question is not whether we have arrived.
The question is whether God is changing the direction in which we are moving.

Pastoral Reflection

There is something deeply pastoral about the sentence:
“My brethren, these things ought not so to be.”
Sometimes love must say exactly that.
Not:
“You're terrible.”
Not:
“There is no hope for you.”
But neither:
“It doesn't matter.”
There are moments when faithful pastoral care must say:
“Brother, sister—this cannot continue.”
That can apply to gossip.
Cruelty.
Racial contempt.
Character assassination.
Humiliation.
Constant criticism.
Divisive speech.
Or words spoken deliberately to wound.
But James also shows us how such correction should be offered.
The person being corrected remains:
“my brother”
or:
“my sister.”
Their wrongdoing does not erase their dignity.
That is wonderfully consistent with verse 9.

James has just reminded us that human beings are made in God's likeness.
Now even while correcting his readers, he treats them accordingly.
There may be an important pastoral principle here:
We should never correct another person's failure to honor human dignity by stripping that person of dignity ourselves.
Truth and grace must remain together.

Something Worth Pondering

Perhaps we sometimes measure our speech by too low a standard.
We ask:
"Did I lie?"
That is a good question.
But James asks something larger.
"Did my speech belong to blessing or cursing?"
Did my words leave another person stronger or diminished?
Did they bring clarity or confusion?
Peace or unnecessary conflict?
Healing or poison?
Did I speak because something needed to be said—or because I wanted the satisfaction of saying it?
And perhaps most importantly:
Was the Jesus I praised with my mouth recognizable in the way I used that mouth afterward?
James is not asking us merely to stop saying bad things.
He is calling us toward a life in which the tongue increasingly becomes consistent with the God whom it blesses.
Because:
"Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing."
And James loves his brothers and sisters enough to tell them plainly:
"These things ought not so to be."

Ask Yourself This

If someone heard the way I praise God and then listened to the way I speak about other people throughout the rest of the week, would they hear the same faith coming from the same mouth?

A Closer Look

James 3:11 — Sweet Water and Bitter

“Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?”
— James 3:11, KJV
James has just confronted his readers with one of the great contradictions of Christian speech:
“Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing.”
Then came his unmistakable pastoral judgment:
“My brethren, these things ought not so to be.”
Now James explains why.
He turns away from the human mouth for a moment and points toward something his readers would have understood immediately:
a spring of water.
His question is simple:
“Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?”
The expected answer is obvious.
No.
A spring produces water according to the source feeding it.
James is beginning to move beneath the words themselves.
The issue is no longer merely:
What came out of my mouth?
The deeper question is:
From what kind of source did those words come?

1. James Moves from the Mouth to the Source

This is an important movement in James's argument.
Up to this point, he has concentrated primarily upon the tongue.
The tongue is small but powerful.
The tongue is a fire.
The tongue is restless.
The tongue is full of deadly poison.
The tongue blesses.
The tongue curses.
But now James takes us deeper.
A spring does not decide what kind of water it will produce after the water reaches the opening.
The character of the water is determined by its **source**.
That means James's teaching about speech cannot ultimately be reduced to:

“Watch your mouth.”
That is certainly part of it.
But James wants more than carefully managed vocabulary.
He wants us to examine the spiritual source from which our speech emerges.
Because sooner or later:
what is within us finds its way out.

2. “Does a Spring Pour Forth…?”

The image of a spring would have carried considerable practical significance for James's first readers.
Fresh water meant life.
People needed it for drinking.
Families depended upon it.
Communities could develop around dependable sources of water.
A spring was valuable precisely because people needed to know what would come from it.
Imagine walking to a spring one morning and finding clean, refreshing water.
Then returning that afternoon and discovering the same opening suddenly producing salty, undrinkable water.
Something would obviously be wrong.
James says our speech can reveal precisely that kind of contradiction.
One moment:
Praise.
The next:
Contempt.
One moment:
Prayer.
The next:
Gossip.
One moment:
Grace.
The next:
Cruelty.
One moment:
“God loves you.”
The next:
“Let me tell you what I really think about that person.”
James looks at that inconsistency and asks us to recognize how unnatural it is.

3. “From the Same Opening”

Notice James's emphasis:

“from the same opening.”
That echoes verse 10:
“From the same mouth…”
The imagery has changed.
The argument has not.
Same mouth.
Same opening.
Different products.
James wants us to feel the contradiction.
If the mouth that blesses God repeatedly produces speech that wounds God's image-bearers, something deserves examination.
Not merely the individual words.
The source.
That is where James is taking us.

4. Fresh Water

Fresh water sustains life.
It refreshes.
It satisfies thirst.
It cleanses.
It allows things to grow.
What a beautiful picture that becomes when applied to Christian speech.
Words can do the same.
A few words of encouragement can strengthen someone who is ready to give up.
A sincere:
“I believe in you.”
can matter enormously.
A compassionate:
“I'm here.”
can comfort someone who is grieving.
A humble:
“I was wrong.”
can begin repairing a damaged relationship.
A gracious:
“I forgive you.”
can release a burden carried for years.
A courageous:
“What happened to you was wrong.”
can give dignity back to someone who has been wounded.
And the simple proclamation:
“God has not abandoned you.”
can become living water to someone walking through a spiritual desert.

The tongue James has compared to a fire can also become an instrument through which grace reaches another human being.
That is worth remembering.
James's purpose is not merely to frighten us into silence.
Christian speech is meant to give life.

5. Brackish Water

But James contrasts fresh water with:
“brackish water.”
Water may look like water and still be unsuitable for drinking.
That makes James's illustration particularly powerful.
Not all harmful speech announces itself as harmful.
Sometimes destructive words are obvious.
Other times they are mixed with enough truth, humor, concern, or even religious language to make them appear harmless.
Gossip can be disguised as concern.
“I'm only telling you so you can pray about it.”
Criticism can be disguised as honesty.
“I'm just telling the truth.”
Cruelty can be disguised as humor.
“Can't you take a joke?”
Pride can be disguised as conviction.
“I'm simply standing for what is right.”
Retaliation can be disguised as justice.
“They needed to hear it.”
And sometimes resentment can even be wrapped in spiritual language.
The words may sound acceptable.
But James invites us to taste the water.
What is actually flowing from the spring?
Grace?
Truth?
Love?
Humility?
Or bitterness?
Pride?
Jealousy?
Resentment?
Contempt?
The label on the container does not determine whether the water is fresh.
The source does.

6. The Same Words Can Come from Different Sources

This also means that we cannot judge speech merely by the sentence itself.
The same words can sometimes arise from very different motives.
A person can speak truth because they love someone.
Another can speak the same truth because they want to embarrass someone.
A pastor can confront sin because restoration is desired.
Another person can mention the same sin because they enjoy condemnation.
A friend can offer correction because the relationship matters.
Someone else can offer correction because being right matters.
The words may be nearly identical.
The **source** may be completely different.
That is why Christian examination must sometimes go beyond:
"Was what I said true?"
We must also ask:
"Why did I want to say it?"
That question can be considerably more uncomfortable.

7. The Tongue Is Often a Spiritual Diagnostic

Perhaps James is teaching us to regard speech as a kind of spiritual diagnostic.
Our words can reveal conditions within us that we might otherwise overlook.
If irritation continually appears in my speech, perhaps I should examine what is feeding that irritation.
If I constantly criticize others, perhaps pride deserves examination.
If I repeatedly gossip, perhaps I need to ask why another person's weakness gives me satisfaction.
If I am always defending myself, perhaps insecurity or pride is operating beneath the surface.
If my humor consistently depends upon someone else's humiliation, perhaps the problem is not simply my sense of humor.
If bitterness continually comes from the spring, perhaps bitterness exists somewhere in the source.
This does not mean we should analyze every poorly chosen sentence until we become afraid to speak.
James is not trying to produce anxiety.
He is calling us toward **self-examination**.
Occasional failure calls for repentance.

Persistent patterns may call for deeper examination.

8. Pressure Reveals What Is in the Spring

It is relatively easy to speak graciously when life is comfortable.
The more revealing moments often come under pressure.
When someone insults us.
When our motives are questioned.
When we are exhausted.
When someone interrupts our plans.
When we are unfairly blamed.
When we lose an argument.
When another person receives the recognition we wanted.
When someone disappoints us.
Those moments do not necessarily create what comes from us.
Sometimes they **reveal it**.
We may be surprised by our own response.
"Where did that come from?"
James might encourage us not to dismiss that question too quickly.
Perhaps it is worth asking.
Where **did** it come from?
What fear?
What pride?
What resentment?
What wound?
What jealousy?
What unconfessed anger?
The moment may have opened the spring.
But the water came from somewhere deeper.

9. Cleaning the Opening Is Not Enough

Suppose a spring became contaminated.
We could polish the stones around its opening.
We could remove the weeds.
We could build a beautiful structure around it.
We could place a sign beside it saying:
FRESH WATER.
None of those things would make the water safe.
The contamination must be addressed at its source.
The same is true spiritually.
We can learn polite language.
We can memorize appropriate Christian responses.
We can become skilled at suppressing words we know we should not say.
Those disciplines are useful.
Sometimes wisdom absolutely means closing our mouths.

But Christianity aims at something deeper than external restraint.
God desires transformation of the person from whom the words come.
Not merely:
a cleaner opening.
But:
a purer spring.
That is why spiritual formation matters.
Prayer matters.
Scripture matters.
Repentance matters.
Forgiveness matters.
Humility matters.
Communion with God matters.
The more deeply God's grace reshapes the source, the more naturally grace should begin appearing in what flows from it.

10. This Does Not Mean Christians Never Fail

We should be careful not to push James's illustration farther than James intends.
Christians still fail.
We still speak foolishly.
We still become angry.
We still say things we wish we could retrieve.
James himself has already acknowledged the universality of failure:
"For in many things we offend all."
So James cannot mean that one sinful sentence proves a person has no relationship with God.
The issue is not occasional failure versus absolute perfection.
The issue is the growing **character of the spring**.
What normally flows from us?
What are we becoming?
When sinful words emerge, do we defend them?
Or do they trouble us?
Do we repent?
Do we seek forgiveness?
Do we ask God to change whatever within us produced them?
The transformed life is not a life that never needs repentance.
It is a life that increasingly **responds to failure with repentance rather than justification**.

Pastoral Reflection

There is a temptation in ministry to concentrate heavily upon the opening of the spring.
Pastors and teachers work with words constantly.

We learn how to preach.
How to teach.
How to counsel.
How to pray publicly.
How to choose words carefully.
Those are valuable skills.
But polished speech is not necessarily evidence of a healthy spring.
A person can speak beautifully from a pulpit and harshly at home.
A teacher can explain grace wonderfully and show very little grace toward someone who disagrees.
A Christian can pray eloquently in public while privately carrying deep resentment.
James invites us beneath the public words.
What is feeding the spring?
That is a question every Christian—and perhaps especially every teacher—must occasionally ask.
Because eventually the source tends to reveal itself.
And when we discover something unhealthy there, God's response is not merely:
"Try harder not to say it."
He invites us to bring the bitterness, pride, anger, jealousy, hurt, or fear itself before Him.
The Gospel reaches deeper than our vocabulary.
Grace goes all the way to the spring.

Something Worth Pondering

James began this chapter by warning us about teachers.
Then he showed us the bit.
The rudder.
The fire.
The untamable creature.
The poison.
The contradiction of blessing and cursing.
Now he brings us to a spring.
His illustrations have progressively moved us toward the deeper issue.
At first the question seemed to be:
Can I control my tongue?
Now the question is becoming:
What kind of person am I becoming?
Because speech is not merely something we produce.
It is often something we **reveal**.
Perhaps that is why the Christian life cannot ultimately be reduced to controlling behavior.

God is forming a people whose lives increasingly reflect His character. And when the spring is being transformed by grace, something should gradually change in the water.
More patience.
More truth.
More humility.
More mercy.
More encouragement.
More forgiveness.
More love.
Not because we have learned to pretend better.
But because God is changing what lies beneath the surface.

Ask Yourself This

When words come from me that are bitter, angry, jealous, contemptuous, or unkind, do I merely regret what came out of my mouth—or am I willing to ask God what those words may be revealing about the spring from which they came?

A Closer Look

James 3:12 — The Fig Tree and Its Fruit

“Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.”
— James 3:12, KJV

James closes this section by returning once more to the natural world.
In verse 11 he asked:
“Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?”
The answer was obvious.
No.
Now James gives us two more questions whose answers are equally obvious:
Can a fig tree produce olives?
Can a grapevine produce figs?
Again:
No.
A tree produces fruit according to its nature.
A vine produces fruit according to its nature.
A spring produces water according to its source.
James has now moved beyond the tongue itself.
He is talking about **character**.
The words coming from our mouths are not isolated spiritual events.
They are fruit.
And fruit tells us something about the tree upon which it grows.

1. “Can a Fig Tree…Yield Olives?”

James's illustration is wonderfully ordinary.
A fig tree does not wake up one morning and decide to produce olives.
Its fruit corresponds to what the tree is.
Likewise, a grapevine does not suddenly produce figs.
There is consistency between the **nature of the plant** and the **fruit it produces**.
James's readers did not need agricultural training to understand his point.
If someone walked up to a fig tree expecting olives, the problem would not be with the tree.
The expectation itself would be absurd.
James asks us to recognize something similarly inconsistent when the life of a person who worships God repeatedly produces speech contrary to God's character.

If we belong to God, James expects that belonging eventually to become visible in what our lives produce.
And one of the places where that fruit becomes visible is our speech.

2. Fruit Reveals Something About the Tree

We normally identify a tree partly by what it produces.
The fruit tells us something about the source.
James applies that principle spiritually.
Words of:
bitterness,
jealousy,
contempt,
deception,
cruelty,
gossip,
arrogance,
and hatred
should cause us to examine what is producing them.
Likewise, words characterized by:
truth,
grace,
encouragement,
mercy,
patience,
humility,
forgiveness,
and love
can reveal something about the work God is doing within us.
This does not mean that one sentence defines an entire person.
James has already told us:
"For in many things we offend all."
A fig tree can have damaged fruit.
A healthy tree can experience difficult seasons.
Likewise, faithful Christians sometimes speak badly.
The issue is not a single failure.
The issue is the **characteristic fruit of the life**.
What is normally growing there?
And when bad fruit appears, are we willing to ask what may need attention beneath the surface?

3. James Is Not Teaching Behavior Modification

This is where James's argument becomes deeper than:

“Christians should say nicer things.”
That would be far too shallow.
If the problem were merely vocabulary, we could solve it by memorizing a list of forbidden words and acceptable phrases.
James knows better.
A fig tree does not produce figs because someone tapes figs onto its branches.
The fruit grows naturally from the life of the tree.
That distinction matters enormously.
It is possible to learn religious language without developing Christian character.
We can learn when to say:
“God bless you.”
“I'll pray for you.”
“Praise the Lord.”
“Everything happens for a reason.”
We can learn the vocabulary of faith.
But religious vocabulary alone does not demonstrate spiritual maturity.
A person can speak fluent **Christian** without consistently speaking like **Christ**.
James wants something deeper than words attached externally to our lives.
He wants the character of God increasingly formed within us so that what emerges from us naturally begins to reflect the One to whom we belong.

4. The Difference Between Restraint and Transformation

Earlier James told us that:
“the tongue can no man tame.”
That does not mean restraint is useless.
There are many times when the wisest Christian response is simply:
Do not say it.
Restraint matters.
Self-control matters.
Pausing matters.
Listening matters.
Being *“slow to speak”* matters.
But James's illustrations of the spring and the tree tell us that Christian discipleship cannot stop with restraint.
Imagine a tree constantly trying not to produce the wrong fruit.
That would miss the point.
Healthy fruit ultimately comes from a healthy tree.
Likewise, the deepest Christian question is not merely:

“How do I keep myself from saying terrible things?”
It is:
“How is God changing me into the kind of person from whom gracious words increasingly come?”
That is the difference between simply controlling behavior and experiencing transformation.

5. “My brethren”

Once again James inserts those affectionate words:
“my brethren.”
He used the same expression in verse 10:
“My brethren, these things ought not so to be.”
Now:
“Can a fig tree, my brethren, yield olives…?”
James's firmness has not diminished his affection.
He is not attacking his readers.
He is shepherding them.
That is significant because this entire section is about speech.
James demonstrates that strong correction and genuine love can exist together.
He does not avoid the truth.
He has called the tongue:
fire,
a world of iniquity,
a restless evil,
and:
full of deadly poison.
Those are strong words.
Yet the people hearing them remain:
“my brethren.”
James does not confuse love with avoiding difficult truth.
Neither does he confuse truth with permission to speak without love.
That balance is worth remembering.

6. The Fruit We Produce Does Not Create Our Identity

There is another distinction worth making.
James is not suggesting that Christians earn their relationship with God by producing sufficiently good speech.
That would contradict the larger movement of the Christian Gospel.
The fig tree does not become a fig tree because it produces enough figs.
It produces figs because it is a fig tree.
That is an important difference.

Likewise, transformed behavior is not the price we pay to persuade God to love us.
Rather, transformed behavior should increasingly become evidence of what God's grace is doing within us.
Grace comes first.
Then grace bears fruit.
That is very much in keeping with James's larger argument about faith and works.
Works do not replace faith.
They reveal living faith.
In the same way, gracious speech does not purchase our relationship with God.
It reveals something about whether that relationship is shaping the person we are becoming.

7. "No More Can Salt Water Yield Fresh"

Then James returns to water.
"No more can salt water yield fresh."
He began verse 11 with the spring.
He closes verse 12 with the spring.
That gives these two verses a beautiful unity.
The fruit corresponds to the tree.
The water corresponds to the source.
James has surrounded his argument with the same principle:
What comes out reveals something about what lies beneath.
Salt water cannot simply decide to become fresh at the opening.
Something must change at the source.
That brings us back to one of the most important lessons of this entire passage.
Christian transformation must reach deeper than the tongue.
God must work within:
our anger,
our pride,
our jealousy,
our resentment,
our insecurity,
our selfish ambition,
our fear,
our wounds,
and our desire to be right.
Otherwise, we may become better at suppressing the symptoms without allowing God to heal the source.

8. Sometimes the Tongue Reveals What We Did Not Know Was There

There are moments when our own words surprise us.
We say something and immediately think:
“Where did that come from?”
That can be an uncomfortable moment.
But it can also become a moment of grace.
Instead of merely regretting the sentence, perhaps we should occasionally follow it backward.
Why did that person's success make me speak sarcastically?
Perhaps jealousy is present.
Why did that criticism make me respond so aggressively?
Perhaps pride is involved.
Why do I continually bring up that person's past failure?
Perhaps I have not forgiven as completely as I thought.
Why do I enjoy telling stories that make someone else look foolish?
Perhaps I enjoy feeling superior.
Why am I always prepared to defend myself?
Perhaps insecurity lies beneath the surface.
The tongue can reveal things about ourselves we would rather not see.
But God reveals what is unhealthy not merely to condemn us.
He reveals it so that it can be surrendered, forgiven, healed, and transformed.
The bad fruit may be what finally causes us to examine the tree.

9. We Should Also Notice the Good Fruit

There is a danger, however, in reading James 3 only negatively.
James certainly wants us to take destructive speech seriously.
But if the tongue can reveal unhealthy things within us, it can also reveal the gracious work of God.
Perhaps once we would have retaliated immediately.
Now we pause.
Perhaps once we would have repeated the gossip.
Now we protect the person's confidence.
Perhaps once criticism would have produced anger.
Now we listen for whatever truth might be present.
Perhaps once we needed the final word.
Now we can let the conversation end.
Perhaps once apologizing felt humiliating.
Now:
“I was wrong. Please forgive me.”
comes more easily.

Those things matter.
They are fruit.
Sometimes spiritual growth happens so gradually that we fail to recognize it.
We may not notice how much God has changed us until we encounter a situation that once would have produced very different words.
The absence of poison can itself be evidence that the spring is becoming healthier.

10. The Goal Is Not Silence

After twelve verses about the danger of speech, we might conclude that the safest Christian is simply the quietest Christian.
But that cannot be James's final intention.
The tongue is capable of terrible harm.
But it is also capable of extraordinary good.
The same human capacity for speech that can curse can also bless.
Our words can:
teach,
encourage,
comfort,
defend,
confess,
forgive,
reconcile,
pray,
praise,
and proclaim the Gospel.
The goal is not to eliminate the power of speech.
It is to **redeem its use**.
James wants the fruit to correspond increasingly with the tree.
He wants the water to correspond with a spring being purified by God.
He wants the mouth that blesses the Lord and Father to become increasingly consistent with the blessing it offers.

Pastoral Reflection

There is a powerful pastoral question hidden within James's illustration:
What kind of fruit do people regularly receive from me?
Not what do I intend to produce.
Not what do I believe I produce.
What actually grows on the branches?
When people leave a conversation with me, are they normally strengthened or diminished?
Do people feel safe bringing their failures to me, or do they expect judgment?

When I correct someone, do they hear concern for them or merely irritation with them?
When I disagree, can I preserve another person's dignity?
When I preach or teach grace, does the congregation encounter that same grace when speaking with me privately?
Those questions are uncomfortable precisely because James is not allowing us to separate our public profession from our ordinary relationships.
A Christian teacher may produce beautiful theological words.
But James asks us to inspect the whole tree.
And there is grace even in that examination.
God is not finished with us.
The discovery of bad fruit is not an invitation to despair.
It is an invitation to bring the tree once again under the care of the One who can transform it.

Something Worth Pondering

James began this chapter with:
"Be not many masters."
From there he took us through an extraordinary collection of images:
the bit,
the rudder,
the fire,
the wild animal,
the poison,
the spring,
the fig tree,
and the grapevine.
Every image has carried us deeper.
At first we saw the **power** of the tongue.
Then its **danger**.
Then its **restlessness**.
Then its **contradiction**.
Finally, James brings us to its **source**.
And perhaps that is where James wanted us all along.
The ultimate Christian question is not merely:
"How can I control my words?"
It is:
"Who am I becoming in Christ?"
Because eventually the tree produces fruit.
Eventually the spring produces water.
Eventually the heart finds a voice.

And when God's grace is transforming the source, what comes from us should increasingly bear the character of the One to whom we belong.
Not perfectly.
Not instantly.
But genuinely.
And increasingly.

Ask Yourself This

If the words I speak are fruit growing from the life within me, what do they reveal about the kind of tree I am becoming—and where might I still need to allow God to change the roots?

A Commentary on the Epistle of James

James 3:13–18 — The Wisdom from Above

“Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom. But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.”

— James 3:13–18, KJV

James has spent much of Chapter 3 talking about words.

He began with teachers and the responsibility carried by those whose words influence others.

Then came the bit.

The rudder.

The fire.

The untamable tongue.

The deadly poison.

Blessing and cursing.

The spring.

The fig tree.

The grapevine.

Now James turns to **wisdom**.

At first, that might seem like a change of subject.

It is not.

James has been moving toward this all along.

The problem with the tongue is not merely a problem of vocabulary.

It is a problem of what lies within the person who is speaking.

And now James identifies two radically different possibilities for what may be operating there.

There is a wisdom that claims to be wisdom but produces:

envy,

selfish ambition,

disorder,

and:

wickedness.

And there is:
“the wisdom from above.”
That wisdom produces an entirely different kind of life.
James therefore brings Chapter 3 to its conclusion by asking us to examine not merely **whether we are wise**, but:
What kind of wisdom are we living by?

1. “Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you?”

James begins with a question:
“Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you?”
We can almost imagine several hands beginning to rise.
After all, people generally like to be considered wise.
Teachers especially may be tempted to think of themselves that way.
A teacher possesses knowledge.
A teacher explains.
A teacher interprets.
A teacher instructs others.
But James began this chapter by warning teachers that they will be judged with greater strictness.
Now he returns to a closely related question.
What actually demonstrates wisdom?
James's answer is completely consistent with the rest of his letter.
Not merely what we **know**.
Not merely what we **say**.
Not merely what we **teach**.
“Let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom.”
Once again James says:
Show me.
That should sound familiar.
In Chapter 2:
“Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.”
Now in Chapter 3:
Show your wisdom by the life you live.
For James, genuine faith becomes visible.
And genuine wisdom does too.

2. Wisdom Is More Than Knowledge

We often use *knowledge* and *wisdom* almost interchangeably.
James does not.
A person may know a great deal and still behave foolishly.

Someone may understand theology and still be arrogant.
Someone may possess tremendous education and still treat people cruelly.
Someone may win every argument and destroy every relationship.
Someone may know exactly what Scripture says and use that knowledge primarily to prove everyone else wrong.
James would not call that wisdom.
Knowledge asks:
“What do I know?”
Wisdom asks:
“How does what I know shape the way I live?”
Biblical wisdom is practical.
It appears in decisions.
Relationships.
Priorities.
Speech.
Humility.
Mercy.
Peace.
And conduct.
That is why James tells the wise person to demonstrate wisdom through:
“a good life.”
Wisdom must become visible.

3. “With Meekness of wisdom”

Then James adds something surprising.
The works of the wise person are done:
“with meekness of wisdom.”
We might expect wisdom to produce confidence.
Authority.
Strength.
Certainty.
James points instead to:
gentleness.
This is not weakness.
Biblical gentleness is strength that does not need to dominate.
The genuinely wise person does not need to prove wisdom by humiliating someone else.
Wisdom does not require the loudest voice in the room.
It does not need to win every disagreement.
It does not need everyone else to recognize how intelligent it is.
There is security in genuine wisdom.
And because of that security, wisdom can be gentle.

That observation connects beautifully with everything James has just said about the tongue.
Perhaps one of the clearest signs that wisdom is operating within us is not simply that we know **what to say**.
It is that we know:
how to say it,
when to say it,
and sometimes:
when not to say it at all.

4. The Counterfeit Wisdom

Then James exposes another kind of wisdom.
"But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth."
Notice again where James directs our attention:
"in your hearts."
We have returned to the source.
Verse 11 gave us the spring.
Verse 12 gave us the tree.
Now James gives us the heart.
What is living there?
Bitter envy.
Selfish ambition.
These can disguise themselves remarkably well.
Envy can pretend to be discernment.
Selfish ambition can pretend to be leadership.
Pride can pretend to be conviction.
The desire to win can pretend to be a defense of truth.
We can even convince ourselves that we are fighting for God when what we are actually fighting for is:
our position,
our recognition,
our influence,
or simply:
our need to be right.
James tells us not to call that wisdom.

5. When Being Right Becomes More Important Than Being Righteous

This may be one of the most dangerous spiritual traps for people who care deeply about truth.
Truth matters.
James certainly does not suggest otherwise.

But it is possible to defend something true in a manner that reveals something deeply unhealthy within ourselves.
We may be factually correct and spiritually arrogant.
Theologically correct and personally cruel.
Biblically correct and motivated by envy.
Correct about the issue and wrong in the spirit with which we approach it.
James therefore asks us to examine more than the correctness of our position.
What is motivating us?
Am I seeking truth?
Or victory?
Restoration?
Or humiliation?
God's glory?
Or my recognition?
Sometimes the difference is visible only to God and the person willing to examine his or her own heart.

6. Wisdom That Does Not Come from Above

James then says something remarkably severe:
"This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish."
Earlier in the letter James told us:
"Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above."
Now the phrase returns.
But this supposed wisdom:
does not come from above.
James gives it three descriptions.
Earthly.
Its horizon is limited to the values and priorities of the present world.
Unspiritual.
It does not arise from a life governed by the Spirit of God.
Devilish.
Its character reflects opposition to God's purposes.
That is strong language.
James wants us to understand that not everything called wisdom deserves the name.
A strategy can be clever and still be ungodly.
A person can be persuasive and still be wrong.
A plan can succeed and still arise from selfish ambition.
A teacher can gather followers and still be motivated by envy.
James refuses to measure wisdom merely by whether it **works**.
He measures wisdom by its **source and its fruit**.

7. Look at What It Produces

Then James gives us a way to identify counterfeit wisdom:

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

Again:

Look at the fruit.

This is the same principle James used with the fig tree.

If envy and selfish ambition are feeding the roots, we should not be surprised by what eventually grows from them.

Competition.

Jealousy.

Division.

Factions.

Resentment.

Manipulation.

Gossip.

Power struggles.

Suspicion.

Disorder.

Perhaps this is especially important within the Church.

A congregation can be discussing completely legitimate matters and still approach them with the wrong wisdom.

Who should lead?

What direction should we take?

How should money be spent?

What ministry should receive priority?

How should a difficult issue be handled?

These may all be legitimate questions.

But if the conversation becomes driven by:

Who gets control?

Who receives recognition?

Whose side wins?

Who gets their way?

James tells us to examine the source.

Because selfish ambition eventually produces disorder.

8. "But the wisdom that is from above…"

Then comes one of the most beautiful contrasts in the entire letter:

"But the wisdom that is from above…"

James has shown us what false wisdom looks like.

Now he describes God's wisdom.

And notice something remarkable.

James does not define wisdom primarily by intelligence.

He defines it by **character**.
The wisdom from above is:
pure,
peaceable,
gentle,
willing to yield,
full of mercy and good fruits,
without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.
This sounds less like an academic description of wisdom and more like a description of a life increasingly shaped by God.
That is precisely the point.
Godly wisdom does not merely help us think differently.
It teaches us to live differently.

9. "First Pure"

James begins:
"first pure."
That word *first* matters.
Peace is important.
Gentleness is important.
Mercy is important.
But godly wisdom does not achieve peace by abandoning truth or righteousness.
It is first:
pure.
There is moral integrity in God's wisdom.
No hidden agenda.
No manipulation.
No selfish ambition masquerading as spirituality.
No willingness to call evil good merely to avoid conflict.
Christian peacemaking is not the same as keeping everyone happy.
Sometimes truth must be spoken.
Sometimes sin must be confronted.
Sometimes disagreement cannot honestly be avoided.
But when wisdom from above confronts, it does so without surrendering the qualities James is about to describe.
Purity does not give us permission for cruelty.

10. "Then Peaceable"

Godly wisdom seeks peace.
Not peace at any price.
But genuine peace.
There is a tremendous difference between a **peacekeeper** and a **peacemaker**.

A peacekeeper may simply try to prevent conflict.
A peacemaker seeks reconciliation.
Sometimes making peace requires entering directly into a difficult situation rather than avoiding it.
It may require truth.
Confession.
Forgiveness.
Repentance.
Listening.
And humility.
Peace is not merely the absence of an argument.
Biblical peace seeks the restoration of right relationships.

11. “Gentle”

Again James returns to gentleness.
That repetition deserves our attention.
The wise person in verse 13 demonstrates works with gentleness.
The wisdom from above in verse 17 is gentle.
Apparently James believes we can learn something important about the source of wisdom by observing the manner in which it treats people.
Harshness is not automatically evidence of courage.
Aggression is not automatically evidence of conviction.
And gentleness is not evidence of weakness.
There is tremendous strength in being able to speak firmly without needing to wound.

12. “Easy to be intreated”

This may be one of the most difficult characteristics on James's list.
“easy to be intreated.”
This does not mean having no convictions.
It does not mean allowing others to manipulate us.
It does not mean truth is negotiable.
It means the wise person is **teachable and reasonable**.
Wisdom can listen.
Wisdom can consider another person's argument.
Wisdom can say:
“Perhaps I was wrong.”
Wisdom does not regard changing one's mind in light of better understanding as humiliation.
That is especially challenging in disagreement.
Sometimes we stop listening because we are already preparing our response.
James's wisdom listens because it is more interested in truth than victory.

13. “Full of Mercy and Good Fruits”

Not merely possessing mercy.
“Full of mercy.”
That sounds very much like the James who told us:
“Mercy rejoiceth against judgment.”
The wisdom from above recognizes human weakness because the wise person understands his or her own need for mercy.
And mercy produces:
“good fruits.”
There is the image again.
Fruit.
James has returned to the tree.
The false wisdom of envy and selfish ambition produces disorder.
The wisdom from above produces good fruit.
Once again:
The fruit reveals the source.

14. “Without partiality, and without hypocrisy”

James has already confronted partiality in Chapter 2.
Now he tells us that true wisdom has no place for it.
Godly wisdom does not change its principles depending upon who stands before us.
It does not offer dignity to the powerful and contempt to the powerless.
Nor is it hypocritical.
It does not wear one face in worship and another in private.
That connects directly with the contradiction James exposed earlier:
Blessing God while cursing people.
James is calling us toward **wholeness**.
A faith that is the same faith everywhere.
A wisdom that is the same wisdom everywhere.
A character that does not require a different mask depending upon who is watching.

15. “The Fruit of Righteousness Is Sown in Peace”

James concludes:
“And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”
What an extraordinary way to finish a chapter that contained so much fire.
The tongue can set a forest ablaze.
False wisdom produces disorder.
But godly wisdom:
sows.

That is an entirely different image.
Fire destroys quickly.
Seeds grow slowly.
That may itself contain wisdom.
Destruction can happen in a moment.
Building righteousness usually takes time.
A cruel sentence can destroy trust in seconds.
Rebuilding trust may require months or years.
A rumor can travel through a church in a day.
Healing the division it creates may take much longer.
James therefore ends not with people who burn, but with people who **plant**.
Peacemakers sow seeds.
Mercy.
Gentleness.
Truth.
Patience.
Forgiveness.
Humility.
Reconciliation.
We may not immediately see what those seeds will become.
But James promises fruit:
"the fruit of righteousness."

The Movement of James

James begins by asking:
Who among you is truly wise?
His answer is not:
The person who knows the most.
It is:
The person whose good life demonstrates wisdom with gentleness.
Then James exposes counterfeit wisdom.
Where the heart contains bitter envy and selfish ambition, the resulting wisdom is not from God.
Its fruit is:
disorder and wickedness.
James then turns our attention upward:
"the wisdom from above."
Its character is completely different:
pure,
peaceable,
gentle,
willing to yield,

full of mercy and good fruits,
impartial,
and sincere.
And finally James gives us the result.
False wisdom produces disorder.
Godly wisdom produces:
"the fruit of righteousness."
The chapter that began with the danger of teachers ends with the character required of those who would truly be wise.
The chapter that warned us about fire ends with:
planting seeds of peace.

Pastoral Reflection

There is a question here that every Christian—and perhaps especially every teacher and leader—should occasionally ask:
What follows me?
When I enter a difficult situation, does greater peace eventually result?
Or greater disorder?
Do my words help people understand one another?
Or choose sides?
Does my leadership produce cooperation?
Or competition?
Do people experience mercy?
Or judgment?
Do I need recognition?
Do I need control?
Do I need to win?
Those questions may reveal more about our wisdom than our knowledge ever could.
James has given us a remarkably practical test.
We do not have to announce:
"I possess wisdom from above."
If it is truly from above, eventually its character should become visible.
Pure.
Peaceable.
Gentle.
Reasonable.
Merciful.
Fruitful.
Impartial.
Sincere.
That is an intimidating list.

But it is also a beautiful picture of what God's grace can form within a human life.

Something Worth Pondering

James has now brought us from the **tongue** to the **heart**, and from the heart to the **source of wisdom itself**.
There are two kinds of wisdom.
One asks:
How can I win?
The other asks:
What is right?
One seeks recognition.
The other seeks righteousness.
One creates rivals.
The other creates peace.
One must prove itself.
The other can be gentle.
One produces disorder.
The other plants seeds.
Perhaps that gives us a simple way to examine the wisdom guiding our lives.
Look at what grows behind us.
If our path is continually marked by resentment, rivalry, division, jealousy, and disorder, James asks us to examine the source.
But if God's wisdom is increasingly shaping us, something else should begin growing.
Peace.
Mercy.
Gentleness.
Truth.
Righteousness.
Not perfectly.
But increasingly.
Because wisdom from above does more than make us knowledgeable.
It makes us more like the God from whom that wisdom comes.

Ask Yourself This

When I look honestly at the fruit my words, decisions, relationships, and influence are producing, do I see the disorder of envy and selfish ambition—or the peace, gentleness, mercy, and righteousness that reveal wisdom from above?

A Closer Look

James 3:13 — Wisdom Made Visible

“Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom.”
— James 3:13, KJV

James begins the final section of Chapter 3 with a question:

“Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you?”

It sounds simple enough.

But anyone who has followed James this far should probably hesitate before answering.

James has a habit of asking questions that turn out to be examinations.

Who possesses faith?

Show me.

Who truly hears the Word?

Show me.

Who practices genuine religion?

Show me.

Who loves the neighbor without partiality?

Show me.

And now:

Who is wise?

Once again James says, in effect:

Show me.

Not by telling me how much you know.

Not by listing your accomplishments.

Not by demonstrating how well you can argue.

Not by pointing to the people who listen to you.

Not even merely by showing how well you know Scripture.

James says:

“Let him shew out of a good conversation…”

Wisdom, like faith, must eventually become visible.

1. “Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you?”

There may be more behind James's question than first appears.

Remember where Chapter 3 began:

“Be not many masters, my brethren…”

Teachers were respected because they possessed knowledge and understanding.

They explained Scripture.

They instructed the community.

They spoke with authority.
It would therefore be easy for someone who occupied the position of teacher to assume that the position itself demonstrated wisdom.
James has spent twelve verses dismantling that assumption.
A person may possess knowledge and still fail to control the tongue.
A person may teach about God and then curse someone made in God's likeness.
A person may speak beautifully in worship while producing bitter water elsewhere.
So James now asks:
Who is actually wise?
The answer cannot simply be:
"The person who teaches."
James wants evidence.
And the evidence is found in the life.

2. Knowledge and Wisdom Are Not the Same Thing

This distinction deserves careful attention.
Knowledge is valuable.
James is not opposed to learning.
Christian teachers should study.
Pastors should understand Scripture.
Believers should grow in their knowledge of God.
But knowledge and wisdom are not identical.
Knowledge can tell us **what is true**.
Wisdom helps us understand **how truth should shape the way we live**.
Knowledge can explain a biblical passage.
Wisdom knows how to apply it faithfully.
Knowledge can identify someone's mistake.
Wisdom knows whether correction is necessary and how it should be offered.
Knowledge may give us the right answer.
Wisdom asks whether this is the right moment to give it.
Knowledge may win an argument.
Wisdom asks what winning the argument might cost.
A person can possess considerable knowledge without possessing corresponding wisdom.
That is why education alone cannot produce the life James describes.
We can accumulate information without becoming more patient.
We can memorize Scripture without becoming more merciful.
We can understand theology without becoming more humble.

We can become extraordinarily skilled at explaining Christianity without becoming particularly Christlike.
James wants knowledge to travel farther.
From the mind into the life.

3. “Let him shew out of a good conversation…”

Here is James's test.
“Let him shew out of a good conversation…”
That sounds remarkably similar to Chapter 2:
“I by my works will show you my faith.”
James remains remarkably consistent.
Faith that cannot be seen in life deserves examination.
Wisdom that cannot be seen in life deserves examination.
James is deeply concerned with the distance between **profession and practice**.
It is not enough to say:
“I believe.”
How does that belief shape your life?
It is not enough to say:
“I am wise.”
What does that wisdom produce?
The Greek idea behind the *good life* here carries the sense of one's manner or conduct of life—not merely isolated good deeds, but the pattern of how a person lives.
That distinction matters.
James is not asking:
“Can you show me one wise thing you have done?”
He is asking us to look at the direction and character of the life itself.
How do you treat people?
How do you respond when challenged?
What happens when you are criticized?
How do you handle disagreement?
What do you do with power?
How do you respond when someone else succeeds?
How do you behave when no recognition is available?
What kind of person are you becoming?
Wisdom leaves tracks.
James says:
Look at the life.

4. Wisdom Is Demonstrated Through Works

Then James returns to another familiar word:
“works.”
That connects this passage beautifully with Chapter 2.

James has already insisted that genuine faith produces works.
Now genuine wisdom does the same.
But notice something important.
James does not say:
"Show me your wisdom by accomplishing impressive things."
The works themselves are qualified:
"your works are done with meekness of wisdom."
That completely changes the picture.
James is not impressed merely by accomplishment.
He is interested in the **character with which the accomplishment is carried out**.
A person can accomplish great things and still be arrogant.
A leader can build an organization while hurting everyone around him.
A teacher can communicate brilliantly while humiliating students.
A pastor can grow a congregation while becoming consumed by ego.
Success alone does not prove wisdom.
James asks:
How was the work done?

5. "With Meekness of wisdom"

This may be the most surprising part of the verse.
James associates genuine wisdom with:
gentleness.
We often associate wisdom with certainty.
Confidence.
Authority.
Decisiveness.
James associates it with gentleness.
That does not mean weakness.
Gentleness is not an inability to stand firmly.
Jesus could speak firmly.
The prophets could speak firmly.
James himself has certainly spoken firmly throughout this letter.
Gentleness means that strength is governed.
A gentle person does not need to crush someone else in order to stand securely.
That fits perfectly with everything James has just taught us about the tongue.
The wise person may possess the ability to deliver a devastating response.
Wisdom may choose not to deliver it.
The wise person may know exactly how to embarrass an opponent.
Wisdom refuses to do so.

The wise person may possess enough knowledge to dominate a conversation.
Wisdom listens.
The wise person may have authority.
Wisdom does not need constantly to remind everyone of it.
Gentleness is strength that has nothing to prove.

6. Wisdom Does Not Need an Audience

There is another implication in James's phrase:
“Let him shew out of a good conversation…”
A good life continues even when nobody is applauding.
False wisdom often needs recognition.
It wants people to notice.
To admire.
To acknowledge.
To say:
“That person really knows what they're talking about.”
But genuine wisdom does not depend upon an audience.
Sometimes the wisest act in a situation will never be recognized.
No one may know that you chose not to repeat the gossip.
No one may know that you surrendered your right to have the final word.
No one may know that you privately apologized.
No one may know that you could have embarrassed someone publicly and chose instead to speak with them privately.
No one may know that you listened patiently when you already understood the problem.
But God knows.
And James says the good life itself becomes the demonstration.
Wisdom does not need to advertise itself.
Its fruit eventually speaks for it.

7. Wisdom Can Say, “I Don't Know”

There is another characteristic that often accompanies genuine wisdom: the humility to recognize the limits of our own understanding.
Sometimes the wisest answer available to us is:
“I don't know.”
That can be remarkably difficult to say.
Especially for teachers.
Especially for leaders.
Especially when people expect us to have answers.
We may feel pressure to explain every mystery.
Solve every problem.
Interpret every event.
Give certainty where certainty simply does not exist.

But wisdom is not pretending to know what we do not know.
There are questions about suffering for which we do not possess complete explanations.
There are decisions where the path forward is not immediately obvious.
There are biblical questions faithful Christians understand differently.
There are circumstances in which we simply cannot see what God is doing.
Wisdom can live with that humility.
It can say:
"I don't know—but I trust God."
Sometimes that may be considerably wiser than offering an answer merely because silence makes us uncomfortable.

8. The Wise Person Is Teachable

If wisdom is accompanied by gentleness, then genuine wisdom must also remain teachable.
The person who believes he already possesses every answer has very little room left to grow.
James will shortly describe wisdom from above as:
"easy to be intreated."
Verse 13 begins preparing us for that.
Wisdom listens.
Wisdom considers.
Wisdom is capable of discovering that someone else saw something we missed.
Wisdom does not regard correction as humiliation.
Perhaps one of the clearest signs of maturity is the ability to say:
"I was wrong about that."
That sentence does not diminish wisdom.
Often it demonstrates it.
The foolish person must always appear right.
The wise person would rather **become more right** than merely **appear right**.

9. James Turns the Mirror Toward the Teacher

Because Chapter 3 began with teachers, this verse deserves special attention from anyone who teaches the faith.
It is possible to become very skilled at explaining how other people should live.
That is one of the occupational hazards of teaching.
We study a passage and immediately begin thinking:
"My congregation needs to hear this."
"My class needs this."
"I know someone who really needs this verse."

Perhaps they do.
But James first asks the teacher:
What does your life show?
Before wisdom becomes something we teach, it must become something we seek to live.
That does not mean teachers must achieve perfection before teaching.
If that were James's requirement, there would be no teachers.
James has already said:
“in many things we offend all.”
But the teacher should be traveling in the direction of the truth being taught.
There should be some correspondence between:
the sermon and the speaker,
the lesson and the teacher,
the doctrine and the life.
Otherwise, wisdom becomes merely information passed from one mind to another.
James wants wisdom to become **incarnated in conduct**.

10. The Connection to the Tongue

Verse 13 also belongs exactly where James placed it.
It follows twelve verses about speech.
That means the tongue is one of the first places where wisdom should become visible.
The wise person knows that not every true thought must immediately become a spoken sentence.
The wise person understands timing.
Tone.
Context.
Motive.
The condition of the listener.
The purpose of the conversation.
Sometimes wisdom says:
Speak.
Sometimes wisdom says:
Wait.
Sometimes wisdom says:
Ask a question.
Sometimes wisdom says:
Listen.
Sometimes wisdom says:
Apologize.
And sometimes wisdom says:

Be quiet.
Knowing the difference is part of:
"meekness of wisdom."

Pastoral Reflection

There is something wonderfully humbling about James's test of wisdom.
He does not ask us to produce a diploma.
A title.
A résumé.
A list of sermons preached.
Books read.
Bible studies taught.
Committees led.
Or years spent in ministry.
He says:
"Let him shew out of a good conversation…"
That puts every Christian on the same ground.
The question becomes:
What kind of person have I become while learning all the things I know?
Has studying grace made me more gracious?
Has studying forgiveness made me more forgiving?
Has learning about God's patience made me more patient?
Has preaching humility made me humbler?
Has teaching about mercy made me more merciful?
Has proclaiming Christ made me more like Christ?
Those may be better measurements of spiritual wisdom than anything hanging on a wall.
And they keep the teacher dependent upon grace.
Because none of us can examine that list without discovering places where God still has work to do.

Something Worth Pondering

James asks:
"Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you?"
Perhaps the wisest response is not immediately to raise our hand.
Perhaps it is to examine our life.
Wisdom is not ultimately demonstrated by how many answers we possess.
It is demonstrated by what those answers have done to us.
Has truth made us arrogant?
Or humble?
Has knowledge made us impatient with others?
Or more compassionate?
Has experience made us dismissive?

Or more understanding?
Has authority made us controlling?
Or more responsible?
Has Scripture merely increased what we know?
Or has Scripture changed who we are?
James's standard is beautifully simple:
Show me the life.
Because true wisdom eventually becomes visible.
And when it does, James says one of its clearest characteristics will not be brilliance.
Not eloquence.
Not power.
But:
"meekness of wisdom."

Ask Yourself This

If every title, accomplishment, credential, and word I have ever spoken were taken away, would the way I actually live still provide enough evidence for someone to say, "There is a person who has learned wisdom from God"?

A Closer Look

James 3:14 — Envy and Strife in the Heart

“But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth.”
— James 3:14, KJV
Verse 13 showed us what genuine wisdom looks like.
The person who is truly wise does not need merely to announce it.
James says:
“Let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom.”
Then comes verse 14:
“But if…”
James now asks us to consider another possibility.
What if something very different lies beneath the appearance of wisdom?
What if the person who appears knowledgeable, confident, accomplished, influential, or spiritually mature is actually being driven by:
“bitter envy and selfish ambition”?
And once again James directs us toward the place where the real examination must occur:
“in your hearts.”
This is not merely a problem of outward behavior.
It is a problem of **motive**.
James is asking us not simply:
What are you doing?
but:
Why are you doing it?

1. “But If You Have…”

James's wording invites self-examination.
He does not begin by telling his readers to identify bitter envy and selfish ambition in everyone else.
That would be considerably easier.
We are often quite skilled at recognizing questionable motives in other people.
We notice their pride.
Their ambition.
Their jealousy.
Their need for recognition.
Their desire for control.
James turns the examination inward.
“If you have…”

That is harder.
Because our own motives are remarkably easy to justify.
We rarely describe ourselves as envious.
We call ourselves concerned.
We rarely describe ourselves as selfishly ambitious.
We say we are simply trying to make sure things are done correctly.
We rarely admit that we want recognition.
We say we only want our contribution to be appreciated.
We rarely admit that we want control.
We say someone needs to take charge.
Sometimes those explanations are completely legitimate.
But sometimes they conceal something we would rather not acknowledge.
James invites us to look beneath the explanation.

2. “Bitter Envy”

James first identifies:
“bitter envy.”
Envy is more than wanting something another person possesses.
At its deepest, envy becomes troubled by another person's good.
Someone else succeeds—and instead of rejoicing, something within us tightens.
Someone receives recognition—and we immediately begin thinking about why we deserved it more.
Someone is praised—and we feel the urge to mention one of their weaknesses.
Someone receives an opportunity—and our first thought is why we should have received it.
Someone's ministry grows.
Someone gets promoted.
Someone is admired.
Someone possesses a gift we wish we had.
Someone receives the attention we wanted.
And suddenly their blessing feels strangely like our loss.
That is the poison of envy.
It can make another person's success difficult for us to celebrate because we have turned life into a competition that the other person may not even know exists.

3. Why James Calls It “Bitter”

James does not merely say:
envy.
He says:
“bitter envy.”
That description is fitting.

Envy has a way of poisoning the person who carries it.
We may think our resentment is directed outward, toward the person we envy.
But bitterness lives **within us**.
The other person may be completely unaware of it.
They go home.
They sleep peacefully.
They continue living their life.
Meanwhile, we replay the comparison.
Why them?
Why not me?
Why were they recognized?
Why was I overlooked?
Why is their life easier?
Why are they succeeding?
Bitterness can turn another person's blessing into a source of misery within ourselves.
And if bitterness remains long enough, it usually finds a voice.
That connects verse 14 directly with everything James has just taught us about the tongue.
The bitter spring eventually produces bitter water.

4. Envy Often Speaks Indirectly

Envy does not always announce itself.
It rarely says:
“I am jealous of that person.”
Instead it may sound like:
“Well, they're really not as impressive as everyone thinks.”
Or:
“You know how they got that opportunity, don't you?”
Or:
“I'm happy for them, but…”
Sometimes the sentence following **“but”** tells us more about the heart than everything preceding it.
Envy may minimize another person's accomplishment.
Question their motives.
Highlight their weaknesses.
Repeat their failures.
Or quietly hope they stumble.
And because James has just spent twelve verses examining speech, we should notice the connection.
Sometimes gossip is not driven merely by our interest in information.
Sometimes it is driven by the satisfaction of lowering someone else.

If I cannot rise above them, perhaps I can bring them down.
James calls us to recognize that for what it is.
It is not wisdom.

5. "And Selfish Ambition"

Then James identifies the second problem:
"selfish ambition."
Ambition itself is not necessarily sinful.
There is nothing inherently wrong with wanting to accomplish something worthwhile.
A person can desire to do excellent work.
A pastor can desire a ministry to flourish.
A teacher can desire to communicate effectively.
A leader can desire an organization to succeed.
A Christian can aspire to greater usefulness in God's service.
The problem is the adjective:
selfish.
What happens when the goal quietly shifts from:
"How can I serve?"
to:
"How can I advance?"
From:
"What is best?"
to:
"What benefits me?"
From:
"How can God be glorified?"
to:
"Will anyone notice what I did?"
From:
"How can we accomplish this?"
to:
"How can I make sure I receive the credit?"
The outward activity may remain exactly the same.
The heart can change the meaning of it completely.

6. Selfish Ambition Can Wear Religious Clothing

Perhaps one of the most dangerous forms of selfish ambition is religious ambition.
Because almost anything can be justified if we attach God's name to it.
We can desire influence and call it ministry.
We can desire recognition and call it leadership.

We can desire control and call it protecting the church.
We can desire victory and call it defending the truth.
We can desire followers and call it discipleship.
None of those ministries is inherently wrong.
Leadership matters.
Truth matters.
Influence can be used for tremendous good.
The danger lies in how easily the human heart can place itself at the center while continuing to use the language of service.
That is why James does not allow outward religious activity to settle the question.
He points inward:
"in your hearts."

7. The Danger for Teachers

The opening of Chapter 3 remains important here.
"Be not many masters…"
Teaching creates influence.
Influence can create recognition.
Recognition can feed pride.
And pride can quietly produce competition.
Who is the better teacher?
Whose class is larger?
Whose sermon receives more praise?
Whose interpretation wins the argument?
Who is regarded as the authority?
Who gets invited?
Who gets quoted?
Who gets noticed?
A person may begin teaching because of love for God and Scripture and still discover selfish ambition growing somewhere along the way.
That does not mean every desire to teach is selfish.
James himself is teaching.
It means teachers must periodically ask a difficult question:
Why do I want people to listen to me?
Is it because I want them to encounter truth?
Or because I enjoy being the one who possesses the answer?
That distinction may be invisible to the congregation.
It is not invisible to God.

8. "In Your Hearts"

Those three words may be the center of the verse.
"in your hearts."
James has brought us back to the source.

In verses 11 and 12 he used:
the spring,
the fig tree,
and the grapevine.
Now he identifies what those images were pointing toward.
The heart.
Speech does not exist independently of the inner life.
Neither does wisdom.
The heart feeds both.
If the heart is dominated by envy and selfish ambition, even intelligence can become dangerous.
Knowledge can become a weapon.
Leadership can become manipulation.
Teaching can become self-promotion.
Truth can become ammunition.
The problem is not necessarily with the gift.
It is with what governs the gift.
A brilliant mind governed by humility can bless many people.
A brilliant mind governed by selfish ambition can do enormous damage.
The question is:
What is happening in the heart?

9. "Glory not…"

James then warns:
"glory not…"
Boasting naturally follows selfish ambition.
If our identity depends upon being seen as wise, successful, important, or superior, eventually we will feel pressure to make sure other people recognize it.
Sometimes boasting is obvious.
We talk about our accomplishments.
Our intelligence.
Our experience.
Our importance.
But boasting can also be subtle.
We can tell stories carefully designed to make ourselves look good.
We can practice false humility while waiting for someone to contradict us.
We can mention important people we know.
We can make sure others understand how indispensable we are.
We can even turn spiritual experiences into evidence of our superiority.
James says genuine wisdom does not need that.
Verse 13 has already given us the alternative:

“meekness of wisdom.”
True wisdom does not have to advertise itself.
The good life provides the evidence.

10. “And False to the Truth”

James's final phrase makes the issue even more serious.
“glory not and false to the truth.”
A person can claim wisdom while living from envy and selfish ambition.
James says that claim becomes a denial of the truth.
We are pretending something is present that the fruit contradicts.
We say:
“This is wisdom.”
James says:
Look at what it produces.
We say:
“I am defending truth.”
James asks:
What is happening in your heart while you defend it?
We say:
“I am serving God.”
James asks:
Whose glory are you seeking?
This is an uncomfortable examination because it means possessing truth is not enough.
We must allow truth to possess **us**.
A person can speak something completely true while behaving falsely toward the truth being spoken.
We can preach humility arrogantly.
Teach grace without grace.
Defend love hatefully.
Speak about unity while creating division.
Proclaim Christ while seeking our own glory.
The words may be true.
Our manner of life may contradict them.

11. Being Right Does Not Automatically Make Us Righteous

This may be one of the most important implications of James's warning.
There is tremendous satisfaction in being right.
Especially when someone else is wrong.
But being right about an issue does not automatically make everything we do while defending our position righteous.
We can be right and arrogant.

Right and cruel.
Right and jealous.
Right and impatient.
Right and vindictive.
Right and motivated by selfish ambition.
James does not ask us to abandon truth for politeness.
Truth matters deeply.
But the God who is the source of truth also cares about the character of the person speaking it.
Christian truth should not become permission for unchristian behavior.
Sometimes we may need to ask ourselves:
Am I still trying to help this person see the truth—or have I begun enjoying the fact that I can prove them wrong?
That is a very different motive.

12. The Cure Begins with Honesty

James does not yet tell us in this verse exactly how bitter envy and selfish ambition are overcome.
But he does something essential first.
He makes us name them.
Spiritual transformation begins with honesty before God.
Not:
“I have no jealousy.”
But perhaps:
“Lord, I don't like how I feel when that person succeeds.”
Not:
“I don't care about recognition.”
But perhaps:
“Lord, it bothered me that nobody noticed what I did.”
Not:
“I only want what is best.”
But perhaps:
“Lord, I wanted my way more than I wanted peace.”
There is grace in that kind of honesty.
We cannot surrender to God what we refuse to acknowledge exists.
And James is not exposing the heart merely to shame us.
He is preparing us to receive something better.
In verse 15 he will expose the source of counterfeit wisdom.
Then in verse 17 he will show us:
“the wisdom from above.”
James does not merely remove false wisdom.
He points us toward true wisdom.

Pastoral Reflection

Verse 14 asks a question that becomes increasingly important the longer a person serves God:

Why am I doing what I am doing?

Motives can change quietly.
A ministry that began from love can gradually become tied to identity.
A leadership role can become something we cannot imagine surrendering.
Recognition can become something we begin expecting.
Being consulted can become something we believe we deserve.
And suddenly another person's success feels threatening.
That does not necessarily mean the original calling was false.
It means the human heart requires continued examination.
Perhaps one of the healthiest prayers a Christian leader can pray is:

"Lord, if there is something in me that wants this more for myself than for You, show me."

That prayer can be frightening.
God may answer it.
But discovering selfish ambition is far better than allowing it quietly to become the wisdom by which we live.

Something Worth Pondering

James has now given us two pictures of wisdom.
Verse 13:

gentleness born of wisdom.

Verse 14:

bitter envy and selfish ambition.

Both may exist in intelligent people.
Both may exist in religious people.
Both may exist in teachers.
Both may be accompanied by persuasive words.
The difference lies partly in the heart.
One wisdom asks:

"How can I serve?"

The other asks:

"What do I get?"

One can celebrate another person's success.
The other feels threatened by it.
One can yield.
The other must win.
One can remain unnoticed.
The other needs recognition.
One points beyond itself.
The other quietly points back toward itself.

Perhaps one of the clearest tests of our motives comes when someone else receives something we wanted.
Recognition.
Success.
Opportunity.
Influence.
Praise.
If we can genuinely rejoice with them, something beautiful may be happening within us.
If their blessing produces bitterness, James invites us not to condemn ourselves—but to pay attention.
Because sometimes the heart reveals itself most clearly when someone else receives the applause.

Ask Yourself This

When someone else succeeds, receives recognition, or is given an opportunity I wanted, can I genuinely thank God for their blessing—or does my reaction reveal bitter envy or selfish ambition that I need to bring honestly before Him?

A Closer Look

James 3:15 — Wisdom That Descends From Below

"This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish."
— James 3:15, KJV
James does not soften his diagnosis.
Verse 14 identified what may exist beneath the appearance of wisdom:
"bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts."
Now James tells us where wisdom governed by those motives comes from.
And his answer is startling.
"Such wisdom does not come down from above…"
James does not call it immature wisdom.
Misguided wisdom.
Incomplete wisdom.
Or poorly applied wisdom.
He says that whatever intelligence or cleverness may be present, it is **not the wisdom that comes from God**.
Then James describes its character with three increasingly disturbing words:
earthly,
unspiritual,
devilish.
James is forcing us to recognize that not everything that appears wise is godly.
A plan may be clever and still be ungodly.
An argument may be persuasive and still be ungodly.
A strategy may succeed and still be ungodly.
A leader may accomplish impressive things and still operate from ungodly motives.
The question is not merely:
Does it work?
James asks:
Where did this wisdom come from?

1. "Such Wisdom…"

It is worth noticing that James still calls it:
"wisdom."
There is a kind of worldly cleverness that can look very much like wisdom.

It understands people.
It understands power.
It understands influence.
It knows how to gain advantage.
It knows how to win an argument.
It knows how to manipulate circumstances.
It knows how to protect itself.
It may even know how to use religious language effectively.
From a purely practical standpoint, it may appear extremely successful.
But James has already given us the test.
What is happening in the heart?
If the strategy is being driven by:
bitter envy
and:
selfish ambition,
then whatever else it may be, James says:
it is not wisdom from above.
This is an important distinction because effectiveness alone cannot determine whether something is right.
Sometimes ungodly methods work.
Sometimes manipulation succeeds.
Sometimes arrogance gains followers.
Sometimes ruthless ambition advances careers.
Sometimes gossip destroys the person it was intended to destroy.
Sometimes intimidation gets compliance.
The fact that something **worked** does not mean God was behind it.

2. "Does Not Come Down from Above"

The phrase:
"from above"
has already appeared earlier in James.
In Chapter 1 James told us:
"Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights…"
Now James deliberately returns to that language.
There are things that come:
from above.
They reflect the character of God.
But the wisdom produced by envy and selfish ambition does not belong to that category.
James wants us to examine the source.
That connects beautifully with the illustrations at the end of the previous section.

The spring reveals its source.
The fruit reveals the tree.
Now wisdom reveals its source as well.
James keeps bringing us back to the same principle:
What comes out tells us something about where it came from.

3. Not Every Good Idea Is God's Idea

This is an important lesson for Christians.
We sometimes assume that if an opportunity appears successful, God must have blessed it.
If the attendance increased, it must have been God's plan.
If the money came in, God must have approved.
If the organization grew, God must have been behind it.
If people followed the leader, the leader must have been wise.
Perhaps.
But James gives us a more demanding standard.
Success by itself proves very little about the spiritual source of something.
We must also ask:
Was it pure?
Was it truthful?
Was it peaceable?
Was it gentle?
Was it merciful?
Was it free from selfish ambition?
Did it honor people made in God's likeness?
Did it produce good fruit?
Those are much harder questions.
James will describe wisdom from above in verse 17, and none of its characteristics is:
"It always gets its way."
That should make us think.

4. "Earthly"

James's first description is:
"earthly."
There is nothing inherently evil about the physical earth.
James is not condemning creation.
Here *earthly* describes wisdom whose perspective does not rise beyond the values of the present world.
It asks questions such as:
How do I get ahead?
How do I protect my position?
How do I make sure I receive the credit?
How do I defeat the opposition?

How do I increase my influence?
How do I come out on top?
Those may be perfectly understandable questions from a worldly perspective.
But the wisdom of God asks different questions.
What is faithful?
What is true?
What serves my neighbor?
What produces righteousness?
What brings peace without compromising truth?
What reflects the character of Christ?
Earthly wisdom is concerned primarily with the immediate advantage.
Wisdom from above sees life beneath the authority of God.

5. The Wisdom of the Kingdom Often Looks Different

This helps explain why God's wisdom can sometimes appear foolish by ordinary standards.
The world may say:
Retaliate.
God says:
Forgive.
The world may say:
Promote yourself.
God says:
Serve.
The world may say:
Make sure everyone knows what you accomplished.
God teaches humility.
The world may say:
Destroy your enemy before your enemy destroys you.
Jesus tells us to love our enemies.
The world may say:
Power proves greatness.
Jesus kneels and washes feet.
That does not mean Christians should be naïve, passive, or incapable of making difficult decisions.
It means the values of God's Kingdom sometimes challenge the assumptions by which the world measures wisdom.
James wants his readers to recognize the difference.

6. “Unspiritual”

James's second description goes deeper:

“unspiritual.”
This wisdom does not arise from a life governed by God's Spirit.
It operates according to ordinary human impulses.
And those impulses can be powerful.
Self-preservation.
Pride.
Competition.
Jealousy.
Recognition.
Status.
Fear.
Control.
There is nothing particularly difficult about understanding why human beings respond to those motivations.
James's point is that Christians are called to something more.
We are not simply creatures of impulse.
We belong to God.
Therefore, our decisions cannot be governed merely by:
“What do I feel like doing?”
or:
“What benefits me?”
The wisdom from above calls us beyond instinct and self-interest.

7. Intelligence Is Not the Same as Spiritual Discernment

A person may be extremely intelligent and still lack spiritual wisdom.
That distinction is essential.
Education is valuable.
Experience is valuable.
Expertise is valuable.
But none automatically produces spiritual discernment.
A brilliant person can be consumed by pride.
An experienced leader can become controlling.
A gifted teacher can become jealous.
A talented preacher can become obsessed with recognition.
A successful Christian can become selfishly ambitious.
The gifts themselves are not the problem.
The question is:
What governs them?
A powerful gift governed by humility can become a tremendous blessing.
The same gift governed by selfish ambition can become destructive.
The greater the gift, perhaps the more important that question becomes.

8. “Devilish”

Then James gives us the strongest word:
“devilish.”
That should stop us.
James has moved from:
earthly
to:
unspiritual
to:
devilish.
He wants us to understand the seriousness of wisdom shaped by envy and selfish ambition.
These qualities are not merely personality flaws.
They participate in a pattern of life opposed to the character and purposes of God.
This connects with James's earlier description of the tongue as being:
“set on fire by hell.”
Once again, James uses strong spiritual language when describing forces that divide, destroy, poison, and corrupt human relationships.
But we should be careful here.
James is not teaching us to label every disagreement or foolish decision as demonic.
Nor does he allow us to avoid personal responsibility by blaming evil spiritual forces for our own behavior.
James has already taught us in Chapter 1 that our own desires can entice us.
The problem is genuinely ours.
Rather, James is saying that envy, selfish ambition, deception, division, and destructive pride belong to a spiritual pattern that stands contrary to God.
They resemble the wrong kingdom.

9. The Enemy's Oldest Temptation

There is something familiar about selfish ambition.
The desire to elevate ourselves has accompanied human sin from the beginning.
We want to determine our own way.
Establish our own importance.
Secure our own position.
Become greater.
Be recognized.
Be admired.
Be right.

Be first.
Yet the pattern of Christ moves in the opposite direction.
Christ serves.
Christ gives.
Christ humbles Himself.
Christ seeks the lost.
Christ shows mercy.
Christ reconciles.
So when wisdom produces arrogance, rivalry, jealousy, and selfish ambition, James says we should not casually attach God's name to it.
Its character points elsewhere.

10. Discernment Requires More Than Asking, "Is It True?"

This section also deepens something James has already taught us about speech.
We often evaluate an argument by asking:
"Is it true?"
That question matters enormously.
But James adds another:
"What kind of wisdom is producing it?"
A person may possess accurate information and still use it maliciously.
A statement may be factually correct and intentionally humiliating.
A criticism may be justified and motivated by jealousy.
A theological position may be sound and defended with selfish ambition.
Truth does not become false because the speaker's motives are wrong.
But wrong motives can make the speaker:
"false to the truth."
Truth is not merely something Christians are called to possess.
We are called to live in a manner consistent with it.

11. Counterfeit Wisdom Often Reveals Itself by Its Fruit

James is about to make this even clearer in verse 16:
"For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work."
There is the test.
Look at what grows.
James has not abandoned the agricultural imagery of verses 11 and 12.
The source produces something.
The tree produces something.
Wisdom produces something.
If a supposed wisdom repeatedly leaves behind:

division,
resentment,
rivalry,
confusion,
pride,
broken relationships,
and disorder,
James tells us to examine the source.
That does not mean every conflict proves that someone acted without wisdom.
Sometimes doing what is right produces conflict.
James himself is confronting his readers rather strongly.
But there is a difference between conflict that arises because truth must be faced and conflict that is continually manufactured by envy and selfish ambition.
Wisdom learns to recognize the difference.

Pastoral Reflection

This verse may be particularly important for anyone entrusted with leadership.
Leaders make decisions.
Teachers influence thinking.
Pastors shape communities.
And successful leadership can create a dangerous temptation:
If what I am doing is working, I must be doing it right.
James refuses to let success answer that question.
The Church must never become so impressed with results that it stops examining character.
Growth is not enough.
Influence is not enough.
Numbers are not enough.
Recognition is not enough.
Winning is not enough.
Even being right is not enough.
We must ask:
What kind of wisdom produced this?
And perhaps the most difficult version of that question is the personal one:
What kind of wisdom is governing me?
Am I acting from prayerful discernment?
Or fear?
From love?
Or jealousy?

From faithfulness?
Or ambition?
From concern for others?
Or concern for my position?
Sometimes those motives become mixed.
That is why humility before God remains essential.

Something Worth Pondering

James gives us three descriptions:
earthly.
unspiritual.
devilish.
Then, only two verses later, he will give us another description:
"the wisdom from above."
James is drawing a line between two radically different ways of living.
One wisdom climbs.
The other serves.
One competes.
The other makes peace.
One needs recognition.
The other can be gentle.
One asks: **"How can I win?"**
The other asks: **"How can I be faithful?"**
One produces disorder.
The other produces righteousness.
And perhaps the most dangerous thing about false wisdom is that it does not always look foolish.
Sometimes it looks extremely clever.
It may even succeed.
That is why James teaches us not to judge wisdom merely by brilliance, persuasiveness, popularity, or results.
Look at the source.
Then: **Look at the fruit.**
Because genuine wisdom ultimately bears the character of the God:
from whom it comes.

Ask Yourself This

When a plan, argument, or course of action seems clever and likely to succeed, do I stop to ask whether it also reflects the character of God—or am I sometimes tempted to call something "wise" simply because it gets the result I want?

A Closer Look

James 3:16 — The Fruit of Envy and Strife

“For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work.”
— James 3:16, KJV
James has just described counterfeit wisdom in remarkably severe terms:
“earthly, sensual, devilish.”
But how do we recognize such wisdom?
How do we know whether something that appears clever, persuasive, successful, or even religious is actually wisdom from God?
James gives us a practical test:
Look at what it produces.
Once again, James returns to fruit.
In verses 11 and 12:
The spring revealed its source.
The tree revealed its nature.
Now the consequences of our behavior reveal the wisdom governing our hearts.
“For where there is envy and selfish ambition…”
something eventually grows.
James tells us what:
“confusion and every evil work.”

1. “For Where There Is…”

James's language suggests more than an occasional jealous thought or momentary desire for recognition.
He is describing an environment in which envy and selfish ambition are allowed to remain and exercise influence.
“Where there is…”
Where envy is cultivated.
Where selfish ambition is tolerated.
Where competition becomes normal.
Where personal advancement becomes more important than faithfulness.
Where people begin protecting positions instead of serving one another.
Where recognition matters more than righteousness.
James says we should not be surprised by what eventually follows.
Bad roots produce bad fruit.

2. Envy Never Remains Entirely Private

Envy begins within.
Verse 14 located it:
“in your hearts.”

At first, perhaps nobody else knows it is there.
Someone succeeds, and we feel resentment.
Someone receives recognition, and we feel overlooked.
Someone is praised, and we quietly compare ourselves.
Someone is given an opportunity we wanted, and disappointment begins turning into bitterness.
All of that may remain hidden for a while.
But James understands something important about the human heart:
What we nurture inwardly eventually influences how we live outwardly.
Envy begins privately.
But eventually it can affect:
how we speak,
how we interpret another person's actions,
how we respond to their success,
whether we support them,
whether we trust them,
and what we tell others about them.
The spring eventually reaches the opening.

3. Selfish Ambition Creates Rivals

Selfish ambition has a similar effect.
When my primary concern becomes advancing myself, other people inevitably begin occupying different categories.
Some become:
useful.
Others become:
obstacles.
Still others become:
competitors.
That is what selfish ambition does to relationships.
Instead of asking:
“How can we serve together?”
we begin asking:
“Where do I stand?”
Instead of:
“What is best for the whole?”
the question becomes:
“What does this mean for me?”
Instead of rejoicing when someone else succeeds, we begin calculating whether their success diminishes our importance.
People who should have been brothers and sisters gradually become rivals.

And once relationships are governed by rivalry, disorder is rarely far behind.

4. "There Will Also Be Disorder…"

James identifies the first result:

"disorder."

This is an especially interesting word after everything James has said about wisdom.

Wisdom should bring clarity.

Stability.

Discernment.

Direction.

But counterfeit wisdom produces the opposite.

Disorder.

When envy and selfish ambition control a group, trust begins to erode.

People question motives.

Sides develop.

Information is withheld.

Conversations occur behind closed doors.

People begin protecting themselves.

Rumors travel.

Every decision becomes political.

Even simple disagreements become tests of loyalty.

Eventually people spend more energy managing conflict than accomplishing the work they were supposed to be doing.

James says this is not accidental.

It is fruit.

5. Disorder in the Church

This warning becomes particularly serious when applied to the Church.

Churches consist of human beings.

And human beings bring human weaknesses with them.

Even people who genuinely love God can become jealous.

Competitive.

Protective of traditions.

Protective of ministries.

Protective of positions.

Protective of influence.

A ministry can quietly become:

"my ministry."

A class can become:

"my class."

A committee can become:

"my committee."

A church can even become:
“my church.”
And once *my* becomes more important than **God's**, selfish ambition has found fertile soil.
Then disagreements that should have been manageable become personal.
Who receives recognition?
Whose idea is accepted?
Who gets to lead?
Whose preference determines what happens?
Who has influence?
Who gets the final word?
James says that when envy and selfish ambition become the governing forces, disorder should not surprise us.

6. But Not Every Conflict Means Someone Is Sinning

We should make an important distinction.
James is not teaching that the presence of disagreement automatically proves the absence of godly wisdom.
Christians can disagree faithfully.
Two sincere believers may examine the same difficult situation and reach different conclusions.
Church leaders may debate the best course of action.
Teachers may interpret a difficult passage differently.
There are even moments when faithfulness requires confrontation.
James himself is confronting his readers.
Jesus confronted wrongdoing.
The prophets certainly did.
So the Christian goal cannot simply be:
“Never create conflict.”
Sometimes avoiding necessary conflict is not peace.
It is fear.
The question James asks is deeper:
What is producing the conflict?
Is it truth?
A genuine moral issue?
A necessary correction?
A sincere difference in judgment?
Or is it:
envy and selfish ambition?
That distinction matters enormously.

7. Peace Is Not the Same as Everyone Agreeing

This prepares us for what James will say in verses 17 and 18 about peace.
Biblical peace does not require everyone to hold identical opinions about everything.
Nor does it mean pretending differences do not exist.
A church in which nobody speaks honestly may appear peaceful while resentment grows beneath the surface.
That is not the peace James describes.
Godly peace allows people to disagree without becoming enemies.
It allows correction without humiliation.
It allows conviction without contempt.
It allows strong opinions without selfish ambition.
The goal is not uniformity.
It is unity shaped by wisdom from above.

8. "And Every evil work"

James then expands the consequences dramatically:
"and every evil work."
Once envy and selfish ambition take control, the damage rarely remains limited to those original sins.
One sin begins creating opportunities for others.
Envy may lead to gossip.
Gossip may lead to slander.
Slander may require deception.
Deception may create suspicion.
Suspicion may create factions.
Factions may produce hostility.
Hostility may produce retaliation.
Retaliation may produce deeper division.
One thing feeds another.
Suddenly an issue that began with something relatively small has produced:
"every evil work."
James has already given us the perfect image for this earlier in the chapter.
Fire.
A spark becomes a blaze.

9. Sin Rarely Travels Alone

There is an important spiritual principle here.
Sin rarely remains neatly isolated.

We sometimes imagine that we can allow one small area of bitterness, jealousy, pride, or selfish ambition to remain while keeping everything else unaffected.
James warns us otherwise.
Envy needs justification.
So we begin criticizing the person we envy.
Selfish ambition needs protection.
So we begin manipulating circumstances.
Pride needs superiority.
So we begin diminishing other people.
Bitterness needs continual nourishment.
So we repeatedly remember the offense.
Eventually the original problem recruits other sins to sustain itself.
That is why James takes the condition of the heart so seriously.
He knows what can grow from it.

10. The Tongue Reappears Without Being Mentioned

Interestingly, verse 16 does not explicitly mention the tongue.
But the tongue is everywhere in the background.
How does envy often become disorder?
Words.
How does selfish ambition recruit supporters?
Words.
How do factions form?
Words.
How are suspicions spread?
Words.
How are reputations damaged?
Words.
How does one person's resentment become an entire group's resentment?
Very often:
words.
James has not abandoned the first half of Chapter 3.
He has shown us what lies beneath it.
The tongue is the instrument.
The heart supplies the motive.
The kind of wisdom we follow determines how the instrument is used.

11. A Practical Test of Leadership

Verse 16 gives us a remarkably practical way to evaluate leadership.
We naturally evaluate leaders by results.
What did they accomplish?

Did the organization grow?
Did the project succeed?
Did the ministry expand?
Did people follow them?
Those things matter.
But James asks us to examine something else:
What grows around the leader?
Does leadership consistently produce trust?
Cooperation?
Maturity?
Mercy?
Truth?
Peace?
Or does it repeatedly produce:
rivalry,
fear,
factions,
resentment,
confusion,
competition,
and disorder?
No leader can prevent every disagreement.
And sometimes good leadership necessarily disturbs unhealthy situations.
But a persistent pattern deserves examination.
If disorder seems to follow everywhere someone leads, James might suggest asking whether something deeper than circumstances is involved.

12. The Same Test Applies to Us

It is considerably easier to apply verse 16 to leaders we dislike.
James probably intends something more uncomfortable.
Apply it to yourself.
What tends to happen around me?
When I enter a disagreement, do I lower the temperature or raise it?
When someone criticizes me, do I seek understanding or immediately recruit defenders?
When another person succeeds, do I celebrate or subtly diminish them?
When I disagree with someone, do I discuss the issue or attack the person?
When I possess influence, do I use it to bring people together or to make sure my side wins?
That does not mean we assume responsibility for every conflict around us.
Other people make their own choices.
But wisdom is willing to ask:

“Lord, what part of this belongs to me?”
That question requires humility.

13. Order Is Not the Same as Control

There is another possible misunderstanding worth avoiding.
If disorder is bad, we might assume that godly wisdom means maintaining strict control.
Not necessarily.
Control can itself become an expression of selfish ambition.
A leader can create apparent order simply by making disagreement unsafe.
Everyone becomes quiet.
Nobody challenges anything.
Decisions happen quickly.
From the outside it may look wonderfully orderly.
But silence created by fear is not the peace James will describe.
Godly order does not require domination.
The wisdom from above is, among other things:
gentle
and:
willing to yield.
That tells us something important.
Godly leadership does not eliminate other voices.
It creates a place where truth can be spoken without relationships being destroyed.

14. Look at the Fruit

Once again James brings us back to the principle that has been running through this entire chapter.
The spring.
The tree.
The fruit.
Now:
the consequences of wisdom.
James gives us permission to evaluate what something claims to be by looking at what it consistently produces.
If a supposed wisdom is continually producing envy, competition, manipulation, hostility, and disorder, perhaps we should stop admiring how clever it sounds.
Conversely, if something is producing:
truth,
mercy,
gentleness,
humility,

reconciliation,
and peace,
we may be seeing evidence of another source.
James will describe that source in the very next verse:
"the wisdom from above."

Pastoral Reflection

Church conflict can be heartbreaking because people who genuinely love God can sometimes hurt one another deeply.
And often the original disagreement is not what causes the greatest damage.
The greater damage comes from what happens **afterward**.
Sides are chosen.
Motives are questioned.
Private conversations multiply.
People repeat only the part of the story that supports their position.
Old grievances are resurrected.
Words become sharper.
Relationships become secondary to winning.
Eventually nobody remembers exactly how the conflict began.
But everyone knows who belongs to which side.
James says:
Pay attention to the fruit.
At some point, Christians must become willing to ask:
What are we producing here?
Even if I believe my position is correct, is the way I am pursuing it producing the character of God?
That does not mean abandoning truth.
It means refusing to allow selfish ambition to masquerade as faithfulness.
Sometimes one of the most courageous things a Christian can do in a conflict is say:
"I still believe this matters, but I do not like what this disagreement is turning us into."
That may be the beginning of wisdom.

Something Worth Pondering

James gives us an extraordinarily simple diagnostic:
Look at what grows.
Envy grows something.
Selfish ambition grows something.
And in verse 17 we will discover that wisdom from above grows something too.
So perhaps when we are trying to discern whether a course of action is truly wise, we should ask more than:

Will this work?
Can we win?
Can I prove my point?
Can I get people to agree with me?
Perhaps we should also ask:
What will this produce in us?
Will it make us more truthful?
More merciful?
More humble?
More peaceable?
More willing to listen?
More like Christ?
Because James tells us that wisdom can be recognized by its harvest.
Where envy and selfish ambition are planted, the harvest is:
"confusion and every evil work."
But James is about to show us another field.
Another seed.
Another harvest.
And another wisdom entirely.

Ask Yourself This

When conflict or disorder develops around me, am I willing to look beyond what everyone else has done and honestly ask whether envy, pride, or selfish ambition in my own heart has helped sow any of the seeds?

A Closer Look

James 3:17 — The Wisdom from Above

“But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.”
— James 3:17, KJV

After the darkness of verses 14–16, verse 17 feels almost like opening a window.

James has shown us:
bitter envy,
selfish ambition,
boasting,
disorder,
and:
“every evil work.”

He has described the wisdom behind those things as:
“earthly, sensual, devilish.”

Then comes:
“But…”

There is another wisdom.
It does not rise from human ambition.
It does not grow from envy.
It does not need to dominate.
It does not leave disorder behind.
It comes:
“from above.”

And James does something remarkable.
He does not describe this wisdom primarily in terms of intellectual ability.
He describes its **character**.

The wisdom from above is:
pure,
peaceable,
gentle,
willing to yield,
full of mercy and good fruits,
without partiality,
without hypocrisy.

James has given us something much more valuable than a definition.
He has given us a way to recognize wisdom when we see it.

1. “But the wisdom that is from above…”

The phrase:
“from above”
should sound familiar.
Earlier James wrote:
“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights…”
Now wisdom comes from the same direction.
Above.
This wisdom originates with God.
That means its character should resemble the character of the God who gives it.
That becomes James's fundamental contrast.
The wisdom of verses 14–16 reflects:
envy,
selfishness,
competition,
and disorder.
The wisdom of verse 17 reflects:
purity,
peace,
gentleness,
mercy,
and integrity.
The source reveals itself through what it produces.
Once again:
The spring tells us something about the water.
The tree tells us something about the fruit.
And the fruit tells us something about the tree.

2. “First Pure”

James begins with:
“first pure.”
That word **first** deserves attention.
Before James calls wisdom peaceable, he calls it pure.
Godly wisdom does not pursue peace by abandoning truth.
It does not overlook evil merely because confrontation would be uncomfortable.
It does not compromise righteousness in order to keep everyone happy.
It does not manipulate.
It does not conceal selfish motives beneath religious language.
There is integrity in the wisdom from above.
Its motives are becoming aligned with God's purposes.

That does not mean the wise person is sinlessly pure.
James has already told us:
“in many things we offend all.”
Rather, the wisdom itself is pure because its source is God.
And the person who receives that wisdom increasingly desires what is right before God.
This gives us an important balance.
Christian peace is never built upon dishonesty.
We cannot create genuine reconciliation by pretending something wrong is right.
Sometimes wisdom must say:
“This is wrong.”
Sometimes wisdom must confront.
Sometimes wisdom must establish boundaries.
Sometimes wisdom must refuse.
But purity determines what comes next.
The confrontation must still reflect the God whose truth we claim to defend.

3. Purity Before Peace—But Never Purity Without Peace

There is a danger here.
Someone could read:
“first pure, then peaceable”
and conclude:
“As long as I'm right, I can behave however I want.”
James has spent the entire chapter preventing that interpretation.
The tongue matters.
Gentleness matters.
Mercy matters.
Peace matters.
How we treat people made in God's likeness matters.
So **first pure** does not mean:
Truth matters and everything else is optional.
It means godly peace begins with truth.
But truth spoken with wisdom from above will also be:
gentle,
merciful,
sincere,
and peaceable.
James refuses to make us choose between:
truth and love.
Godly wisdom requires both.

4. “Then Peaceable”

The next characteristic is:
“peaceable.”
The wisdom from above does not enjoy conflict for its own sake.
It does not need enemies.
It does not look for opportunities to fight.
It does not enter every disagreement asking:
“How do I win?”
Instead it asks:
“Is there a faithful path toward peace?”
That is very different from simply avoiding conflict.
Avoidance can leave serious problems untouched.
Peace sometimes requires difficult conversations.
It may require confession.
Repentance.
Correction.
Forgiveness.
Restitution.
Listening.
And sometimes tears.
The peacemaker is not the person who pretends nothing is wrong.
The peacemaker is the person willing to do the difficult work necessary for genuine reconciliation.

5. Peaceable Does Not Mean Passive

James's description of wisdom is not a description of weakness.
A peaceable Christian may still need to stand firmly.
There are truths that cannot be compromised.
There are injustices that should be confronted.
There are behaviors that cannot be tolerated.
There are moments when silence would become participation in wrongdoing.
But even then the wisdom from above asks:
How can I stand for what is right without becoming what I oppose?
That may be one of the hardest questions in Christian discipleship.
Anger can make cruelty feel righteous.
Conflict can make contempt feel justified.
Being mistreated can make retaliation feel reasonable.
James tells us that wisdom from above follows another path.
It remains pure.
And it remains peaceable.

6. “Gentle”

Then James says:
“gentle.”
We have heard this already.
Verse 13 told us that works should be done with:
“meekness of wisdom.”
Now James identifies gentleness as one of the characteristics of the wisdom itself.
The repetition matters.
Apparently, gentleness is not incidental to wisdom.
It is one of the ways wisdom becomes recognizable.
Gentleness is not weakness.
It is strength under control.
The gentle person may possess authority without needing to dominate.
Knowledge without needing to humiliate.
Conviction without contempt.
Strength without cruelty.
The gentle person does not need to make another person small in order to feel large.
That is wisdom.

7. “Easy to be intreated”

Then James gives us one of the most challenging descriptions:
“easy to be intreated.”
This does not mean:
easily manipulated.
It does not mean:
without conviction.
And it certainly does not mean:
truth does not matter.
Rather, godly wisdom is willing to listen.
It can be reasoned with.
It is teachable.
It does not enter every conversation with the conclusion already locked and the ears already closed.
This may be one of the clearest differences between wisdom and pride.
Pride says:
“I already know.”
Wisdom says:
“Let me listen.”
Pride says:
“I cannot admit I was wrong.”
Wisdom says:

“If I am wrong, I want to know.”
Pride hears disagreement as disrespect.
Wisdom can hear disagreement as an opportunity to understand.

8. The Wisdom to Change Our Mind

There is tremendous spiritual maturity in being able to say:
“I was wrong.”
Or:
“I had not considered that.”
Or:
“You may be right.”
Or even:
“I need to think and pray about what you have said.”
Those sentences do not indicate weakness.
They may indicate wisdom from above.
A person who can never change his mind is not necessarily a person of strong conviction.
He may simply be a person who cannot tolerate being wrong.
James tells us that godly wisdom is:
“easy to be intreated.”
Truth has nothing to fear from honest listening.

9. “Full of Mercy…”

Then James says:
“full of mercy.”
Not occasionally merciful.
Not merciful when convenient.
Full of mercy.
That connects us directly with Chapter 2:
“Mercy rejoiceth against judgment.”
A wise person understands mercy because a wise person understands how much mercy he or she has received.
It becomes difficult to stand before the grace of God and maintain the illusion that everyone else needs mercy more than we do.
Mercy does not deny wrongdoing.
It does not eliminate accountability.
It does not mean consequences never exist.
Mercy means that even when dealing with failure, we remember that we ourselves live by grace.
There is a humility in mercy.
I am not standing above you as someone who has never needed forgiveness.
I am standing beside you as someone who has.

10. Mercy Changes the Way We Correct

This becomes especially important when someone is wrong.
There is a way to correct someone that seeks restoration.
And there is a way to correct someone that enjoys humiliation.
Both may contain the same factual information.
Only one reflects wisdom from above.
Mercy asks:
How can truth help restore this person?
Selfish ambition asks:
How can truth prove that I was right?
Mercy does not weaken truth.
It changes what we intend to do with it.

11. "And Good Fruits"

Then James gives us the image that has been running throughout this section:
fruit.
The wisdom from above produces:
"good fruits."
James does not leave wisdom in the realm of theory.
Once again:
Show me.
If wisdom is genuine, eventually something should grow.
Compassion.
Forgiveness.
Patience.
Generosity.
Reconciliation.
Faithfulness.
Kindness.
Justice.
Humility.
Words that heal rather than poison.
Relationships strengthened rather than unnecessarily broken.
James does not ask us merely to admire these qualities.
He expects wisdom to produce them.

12. Wisdom Can Be Tested by Its Harvest

This gives us a practical question whenever we face a difficult decision:
What kind of fruit is this likely to produce?
Not merely:
Will it succeed?
Will it make me look good?

Will people agree with me?
Will I win?
But:
Will this produce something good?
Will it strengthen truth?
Will it promote mercy?
Will it preserve dignity?
Will it encourage righteousness?
Will it create a faithful path toward peace?
We cannot always predict outcomes.
Sometimes the right decision still produces painful consequences.
But wisdom considers the fruit.

13. "Without a Trace of Partiality…"

James then returns to a problem he confronted at length in Chapter 2:
partiality.
Godly wisdom does not determine the value of people according to:
wealth,
status,
influence,
appearance,
usefulness,
education,
or power.
Remember James's earlier example.
The person with gold rings and fine clothes enters the assembly.
The poor person enters as well.
Worldly wisdom may immediately calculate:
Which one can help us?
James says that is not wisdom from above.
Godly wisdom sees something else:
people made in the likeness of God.
That connection brings us all the way back to verse 9.
The same God whose wisdom comes from above created the people standing before us.
Therefore, wisdom does not assign human dignity according to worldly rank.

14. "Or Hypocrisy"

Finally:
"without…hypocrisy."
There is no mask.
No performance.

No carefully manufactured appearance of spirituality hiding selfish ambition beneath it.
Wisdom from above is sincere.
The person does not need one personality in church and another at home.
One vocabulary in prayer and another when angry.
One standard for friends and another for enemies.
One set of principles when they benefit us and another when they cost us.
This connects beautifully with James's entire argument about the tongue:
“Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing.”
James wants wholeness.
Integrity.
A faith in which what we profess and how we live increasingly belong together.

15. The Sevenfold Portrait

Taken together, James has given us an extraordinary portrait:
Pure — committed to what is right before God.
Peaceable — seeking reconciliation rather than unnecessary conflict.
Gentle — possessing strength without the need to wound.
Willing to yield — teachable, reasonable, able to listen.
Full of mercy and good fruits — extending grace that becomes visible in action.
Without partiality — treating people without selfish favoritism.
Without hypocrisy — sincere, consistent, genuine.
Notice what is absent.
James does not say the wisdom from above is:
impressive,
dominant,
eloquent,
powerful,
popular,
successful,
or intellectually superior.
Those things may or may not accompany wisdom.
They do not define it.
James measures wisdom by something deeper.
Character.

16. A Portrait That Looks Familiar

And perhaps as we read James's list, something begins to feel familiar.
Pure.
Peaceable.
Gentle.
Merciful.

Sincere.
This is not merely an abstract description of good decision-making.
It sounds like the kind of life we would expect from someone increasingly shaped by Christ.
That is surely no accident.
Wisdom from above does not merely help us make better choices.
It gradually forms within us the character of the One from above.
That may be the deepest definition of Christian wisdom.
Not simply:
knowing what Jesus would say.
But increasingly becoming the kind of person who responds as Jesus would respond.

Pastoral Reflection

There is great value in using James 3:17 as a spiritual examination.
When facing a difficult conversation, decision, disagreement, or conflict, perhaps we could place our intended response beside this verse.
Is it pure?
Is it peaceable?
Is it gentle?
Am I willing to listen?
Is there mercy in it?
What fruit am I hoping it produces?
Am I treating everyone by the same standard?
Am I being sincere?
That does not guarantee an easy answer.
Sometimes every available choice is difficult.
But those questions may reveal something about the wisdom guiding us.
And perhaps one question belongs above all the others:
Does my response look like wisdom from above?
Because Christians are not merely called to reach the correct destination.
We are called to travel there in a manner worthy of Christ.

Something Worth Pondering

James has given us two kinds of wisdom.
The first is marked by:
envy,
selfish ambition,
disorder,
and wickedness.
The second is marked by:
purity,
peace,
gentleness,

reasonableness,
mercy,
good fruit,
impartiality,
and sincerity.
That gives us a remarkably practical test.
When we wonder what kind of wisdom is operating in a person, a church, a family, a ministry—or ourselves—we can examine what it consistently produces.
But perhaps there is an even more personal way to read this verse.
Instead of treating James 3:17 merely as a description of wisdom, we might turn it into a prayer:
Lord, make my heart pure.
Make me a person of peace.
Teach me gentleness.
Make me willing to listen.
Fill me with mercy.
Let my life bear good fruit.
Free me from partiality.
Make me sincere.
Because the greatest evidence that we have received wisdom from above may not be that we have become better at explaining wisdom.
It may be that, through the grace of God,
we have begun to look more like the One from whom that wisdom came.

Ask Yourself This

If I placed the way I handle disagreement, correction, leadership, and difficult people beside James's description of wisdom from above—pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, merciful, fruitful, impartial, and sincere—which qualities would others already recognize in me, and which ones still need to be formed more deeply by God?

A Closer Look

James 3:18 — The Fruit of Righteousness

“And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.”
— James 3:18, KJV
James ends Chapter 3 with an image entirely different from the one that dominated its middle.
Earlier there was:
fire.
Now there is:
seed.
Earlier James warned that the tongue can ignite something enormous from the smallest spark.
Now he describes something else that begins small but eventually becomes enormous:
a harvest.
Both begin with something seemingly insignificant.
A spark.
A seed.
And perhaps James leaves us with a choice.
We can move through the lives of other people dropping sparks.
Or we can move through their lives planting seeds.
One produces destruction.
The other produces:
“the fruit of righteousness.”

1. “And a Harvest…”

A harvest does not appear overnight.
That is part of the beauty of James's image.
Planting requires faith.
The farmer places seed into the ground and, for a time, sees very little.
There is no immediate harvest.
There may not even be immediate evidence that anything is happening.
But beneath the soil, life begins.
Roots form.
Growth begins.
Eventually something appears above the ground.
And in time:
the harvest comes.
Much of Christian discipleship works that way.
We would often prefer immediate results.

We want the difficult conversation to repair the relationship immediately.
We want the apology to erase the hurt immediately.
We want forgiveness to remove every painful memory immediately.
We want the sermon to transform the listener immediately.
We want prayer to change circumstances immediately.
Sometimes God works dramatically and quickly.
Often He works like a farmer.
Quietly.
Patiently.
Gradually.
Seed by seed.

2. Righteousness Is Cultivated

James calls what eventually grows:
"the fruit of righteousness."
That is important.
Righteousness is not merely something Christians discuss.
It is something that should increasingly become visible in the life of God's people.
Truth becomes action.
Faith becomes works.
Wisdom becomes conduct.
Mercy becomes behavior.
Peace becomes practice.
Once again, James refuses to allow Christianity to remain merely theoretical.
The question is always:
What is growing?
If we have received wisdom from above, something should eventually appear in the field.
Not perfection.
But fruit.
Not instant maturity.
But growth.
Not merely words about righteousness.
But increasingly:
a harvest of righteousness.

3. What Does Righteousness Look Like?

We sometimes hear the word *righteousness* and think only of avoiding wrongdoing.
James gives us a much fuller picture.
Throughout this letter righteousness has been taking visible form.
Caring for those in need.

Refusing partiality.
Controlling the tongue.
Showing mercy.
Putting faith into action.
Treating people made in God's likeness with dignity.
Rejecting selfish ambition.
Practicing gentleness.
Seeking peace.
Bearing good fruit.
Righteousness is not merely the absence of evil.
It is the presence of a life increasingly aligned with the character and purposes of God.
And James says that kind of life can become a:
harvest.

4. "Is Sown…"

Before there can be a harvest, however, something must be planted.
"is sown…"
That means somebody must sow.
Someone must begin.
Someone must plant the first seed.
That can be difficult in broken relationships because we often wait for the other person.
I'll apologize when they apologize.
I'll speak kindly when they stop being hostile.
I'll forgive when they admit what they did.
I'll listen when they start listening to me.
I'll make peace when they take the first step.
And sometimes the other person never does.
James's image quietly challenges us:
Who will sow?
Peacemaking often requires someone to plant the first seed without knowing whether the other person will respond.
That requires courage.

5. Sowing Is Different from Controlling

There is also humility in the image.
The farmer can plant.
The farmer can cultivate.
The farmer can water.
But the farmer cannot command the seed:
"Grow."
That belongs to God.
This may be especially important in ministry and relationships.

We can speak truth.
We can show mercy.
We can apologize.
We can forgive.
We can teach.
We can encourage.
We can attempt reconciliation.
But we cannot control another person's response.
That distinction can be liberating.
Christian responsibility is faithfulness.
We sow faithfully.
We entrust the growth to God.
Sometimes the seed we plant today may not bear visible fruit for years.
Sometimes we may never personally see the harvest.
But that does not mean the planting was wasted.

6. "In Peace…"

James then tells us the environment in which this righteousness is sown:
"in peace."
That connects directly with verse 17.
The wisdom from above is:
"peaceable."
Now righteousness itself is:
"sown in peace."
This is significant because Christians can sometimes become so passionate about righteousness that we pursue it in unrighteous ways.
We may convince ourselves:
"The cause is right, therefore whatever I do to advance it must also be right."
James will not allow that.
The seed and the manner of sowing belong together.
Righteousness planted through:
hatred,
humiliation,
manipulation,
selfish ambition,
or contempt
is already contradicting the righteousness we claim to seek.
God's wisdom is not merely concerned with the destination.
It is concerned with **how we travel there**.

7. Truth and Peace Belong Together

This does not mean peace replaces truth.
Verse 17 began:

“first pure, then peaceable.”
James refuses to separate them.
Peace without truth can become avoidance.
Truth without peace can become brutality.
Godly wisdom holds them together.
There are times when truth must disturb a false peace.
There are times when difficult things must be said.
There are times when wrongdoing must be confronted.
But even then the goal should not be destruction.
The goal should be righteousness.
Restoration where possible.
Repentance where necessary.
Justice where required.
Reconciliation where it can faithfully occur.
The Christian does not speak truth merely to win.
We speak truth because we desire good fruit.

8. “For Those Who Make Peace”

James does not say:
those who like peace.
Most people like peace when peace means nobody is troubling them.
He says:
“those who make peace.”
Peace requires participation.
Peacemaking is active.
It may require:
listening,
patience,
truthfulness,
confession,
forgiveness,
humility,
courage,
restraint,
and sometimes considerable sacrifice.
A peacemaker does not simply stand between two sides saying:
“Everybody calm down.”
A peacemaker tries to understand what has been broken and what righteousness requires for genuine peace to become possible.
That is difficult work.
But James calls such people:
sowers.

9. Peacemaking Is Not Appeasement

We should make another important distinction.
Making peace does not mean allowing abuse, injustice, or destructive behavior to continue.
Sometimes the peaceful and righteous response requires a boundary.
Sometimes it requires saying:
"No."
Sometimes reconciliation cannot occur because the other person refuses truth or repentance.
Christian peacemaking does not require pretending that evil is harmless.
Nor does forgiveness always mean restoring a relationship to exactly what it was before.
James has already told us wisdom is:
"first pure."
So the peace James describes is peace grounded in truth and righteousness.
The peacemaker does not hide the wound.
The peacemaker seeks healing.

10. The Peacemaker May Never Receive Credit

There is something else about sowing seed.
Much of the work happens quietly.
Peacemakers are not always noticed.
The person who starts the fire often receives immediate attention.
The person who quietly prevents one may receive none.
Nobody may know about the angry response you chose not to send.
Nobody may know about the gossip you refused to repeat.
Nobody may know that you defended someone who was not present.
Nobody may know that you apologized first.
Nobody may know that you deliberately gave someone else the benefit of the doubt.
Nobody may know that you could have won an argument and instead chose to preserve a relationship.
Nobody may know.
But seeds were planted.
And God sees the field.

11. The Contrast with Verse 16

James has constructed a powerful contrast between verses 16 and 18.
Verse 16:
envy + selfish ambition → disorder + wickedness.
Verse 18:
peace → righteousness.

Both describe processes.
Both describe seeds producing consequences.
And both invite us to examine what we are planting.
If I continually sow:
resentment,
suspicion,
competition,
gossip,
anger,
and selfish ambition,
I should not be surprised when disorder grows.
But if I sow:
truth,
mercy,
gentleness,
forgiveness,
humility,
and peace,
James tells me to expect another kind of harvest.
Righteousness.

12. From Fire to Seed

Perhaps this is the image that brings the whole chapter together.
Earlier James wrote:
"And the tongue is a fire."
A fire spreads rapidly.
A careless sentence can damage a relationship in seconds.
A rumor can spread through a community almost immediately.
A cruel remark may require only a moment to speak.
Destruction can be terribly fast.
But now James gives us:
seed.
Seed works differently.
Seed requires patience.
A relationship damaged in one conversation may require many conversations to repair.
Trust destroyed in a moment may take years to rebuild.
A person wounded by cruel words may need repeated experiences of grace before believing those wounds do not define them.
The fire may have been immediate.
The harvest usually is not.
That is why peacemaking requires perseverance.

Do not stop planting simply because the field has not yet turned green.

13. Words Can Plant Seeds Too

This also completes James's teaching about the tongue in a beautiful way.
Words can burn.
But words can also plant.
“I forgive you.”
“I was wrong.”
“I'm sorry.”
“Tell me what happened.”
“I understand.”
“How can I help?”
“I believe you can do this.”
“I am praying for you.”
“You are not alone.”
“Let's try again.”
“I love you.”
Words that could have been instruments of destruction can become instruments of grace.
The tongue James called:
“a fire”
can, when surrendered to God, become something through which seeds of righteousness are planted.
That may be one of the most hopeful truths in the entire chapter.

14. A Harvest We May Never See

Anyone who teaches, pastors, parents, mentors, or simply tries faithfully to influence another person's life eventually learns something about planting.
You do not always get to see the harvest.
A word spoken today may not be understood until years later.
A lesson may be remembered long after the teacher has forgotten teaching it.
An act of mercy may influence a decision we never know about.
A prayer may bear fruit after we are gone.
Faithfulness does not require us to see everything God does with the seed.
It requires us to sow well.
There is humility in that.
We are not the harvest.
We are not even the source of life within the seed.
We are simply called to be faithful sowers in the field God has given us.

15. The Final Movement of Chapter 3

Look at where James has taken us.
He began:
“Be not many masters…”
Then:
the bit.
A small instrument capable of directing something powerful.
Then:
the rudder.
Something small determining direction.
Then:
the fire.
Something small capable of enormous destruction.
Then:
the untamable tongue.
Then:
deadly poison.
Then:
blessing and cursing from the same mouth.
Then:
the spring.
Then:
the tree and its fruit.
Then James moved deeper:
the heart.
Bitter envy.
Selfish ambition.
False wisdom.
And finally:
wisdom from above.
Pure.
Peaceable.
Gentle.
Willing to yield.
Merciful.
Fruitful.
Impartial.
Sincere.
And now the final image:
a field.
Someone is sowing.
Something is growing.

And eventually:
there will be a harvest.
The question Chapter 3 leaves us with may therefore be surprisingly simple:
What am I planting with my life and my words?

Pastoral Reflection

There are people whose presence seems to leave fires behind them.
Conversations become conflicts.
Differences become divisions.
Criticism becomes condemnation.
People become suspicious of one another.
James has shown us where that can come from:
envy,
selfish ambition,
and wisdom that is not from above.
But there are also people whose presence seems to create room for something better.
They listen.
They lower the temperature.
They speak truth without unnecessary cruelty.
They refuse gossip.
They protect dignity.
They admit when they are wrong.
They forgive.
They help people hear one another.
They do not surrender truth, but neither do they weaponize it.
Those people may never receive much attention.
Farmers rarely make headlines for planting seeds.
But James says something is growing behind them.
A harvest of righteousness.
Perhaps one of the greatest things that could ever be said about a Christian life would be:
“Wherever that person went, they planted seeds of peace.”

Something Worth Pondering

A spark and a seed can both fit in the palm of your hand.
Both seem small.
Both can become something far larger than themselves.
But they move in opposite directions.
The spark consumes.
The seed produces.
The spark leaves ashes.
The seed leaves fruit.

The spark may accomplish its work almost immediately.
The seed requires patience.
Every day we carry both possibilities into our relationships.
Our words can ignite resentment.
Or plant understanding.
Our response to criticism can ignite conflict.
Or plant humility.
Our treatment of someone who has failed can ignite shame.
Or plant restoration.
Our handling of disagreement can ignite factions.
Or plant peace.
We may never know how far either one travels.
That is why James has taken the tongue so seriously.
And perhaps that is why he ends Chapter 3 not with another warning about what our words can destroy, but with a vision of what a life governed by wisdom from above can **grow**.
The same mouth that could start a fire can plant a seed.
And by the grace of God:
the field can become a harvest.

Ask Yourself This

As I look at the people and places God has placed in my life, am I leaving behind sparks that others must extinguish—or am I faithfully planting seeds of truth, mercy, reconciliation, and peace that God can grow into a harvest of righteousness?