

# Fire Danger: HIGH

Taming the Tongue Part 2  
James 3:2-10 5-24-2015

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Summary: Bridling the tongue is one of the three marks of true religion from 1:26-27. The tongue is powerful (bridle the tongue and you bridle the whole body) to hurt and to influence and (especially) to steer. The tongue is incendiary/evil, with satanic influence. The tongue is unstable/double-minded. Blessing God and cursing His image is a very severe evil. Four applications: 1) Wake up to the urgency of putting a bridle on our tongues. 2) Be alert to the image of God. 3) Remember our sibling relationship to one another. 4) Entrust ourselves to the one who judges justly.

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**James 3:1** Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. **2** We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. **3** When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. **4** Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. **5** Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. **6** The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. **7** All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, **8** but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. **9** With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. **10** Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. **11** Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? **12** My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

# Introduction

## Context: True Religion

One of the main purposes of the book of James is to teach us the difference between true religion and false religion. James is writing to people who understood that salvation only comes through faith in Jesus Christ. But a lot of them were confused about what true faith really is and so James writes a book describing some observations you can make of your own life that will help you discern whether your faith is true saving faith or not. And he gives us a concise summary of what to look for in the last paragraph of chapter 1. If you remember, James gave us three things to look for that are characteristic of true religion:

- 1) Avoiding worldliness – so we don't become contaminated or defiled by the world
- 2) Loving care for the needy
- 3) A controlled tongue

**James 1:26 If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not bridle his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. 27 Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.**

How do you know if your faith is real? True faith results in purity, love, and a controlled tongue. In chapter 2 James expanded on the love part. In chapter 4 he is going to expand on the part about avoiding worldliness. But here in chapter 3 he expands on the controlled tongue.

## Review

He started by warning us about being too cavalier about becoming a Bible teacher.

**James 3:1 Not many of you should be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.**

The consequences for sin are more severe for the teacher than for everyone else, and that's scary, because the teacher has more occasions to sin because he has to use his mouth so much.

## Striving for Maturity

**2 We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man**

One of the clearest, most evident marks of spiritual maturity is a bridled tongue. Don't misunderstand that word **perfect**. Sometimes when we see that word in Scripture, we are inclined to just throw up our hands and say, "Well, that's completely out of reach." We think of it like jumping over the moon - something so far out of the range of possibility that it is a waste of time to even try. But that word translated **perfect** is the word for maturity. In fact, that is how it is translated back in chapter 1.

**James 1:4 Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.**

So the point is not that controlling the tongue is unattainable so why even try? The point is that the greater your maturity the more you will be able to put a bridle on your tongue. And the more success you have at bridling your tongue, the more self-control you will have in every other area in your life. Will you ever reach full maturity in this life, where you never stumble at all? No, but obviously James wants every one of us to continue to make progress in the area of controlling the tongue – otherwise why would he even bother writing this chapter? Making more and more progress in the area of controlled speech is a mark of true religion, which means no progress would be a mark of false religion. Look at how James describes the spiritually mature man in verse two.

## The Tongue is Powerful

**2 We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.**

Literally, **able to bridle his whole body**. If you can bridle your tongue, you can bridle your whole body. The word **bridle** refers to the headgear that they put on a horse so it can be controlled. So to bridle something means to bring it under control.

### Bridle not Muzzle

Please notice that it is a bridle, not a muzzle. The solution to sinful speech is not to muzzle your mouth, but to bridle it.

**Psalm 39:1 I said, “I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin; I will put a muzzle on my mouth as long as the wicked are in my presence.” 2 But when I was silent and still, not even saying anything good, my anguish increased.**

When God sanctifies us, brings us to maturity and conforms us more to the image of His Son, he does not accomplish that by removing our voicebox. He doesn't take away our speech, He sanctifies it. The most spiritually mature people aren't necessarily the quietest people. Some talk more than others. The marker is not the number of words. It is the degree of control over those words.

So if having control over my tongue is the mark of spiritual maturity, how do I get that kind of spiritual maturity? How does one go about putting a bridle on his tongue? The answer to that isn't going to come until verse 13. We will get to that, but before we get there, James has a long section of teaching just about the nature of the tongue. He wants to talk to us in some detail about the power of the tongue, the evil of the tongue, and the instability of the tongue. It is influential, incendiary, and inconsistent. It seems that before giving us the solution to the problem, James is very concerned to make sure we understand the magnitude of the problem. Most of us have very little appreciation of how urgent this issue really is. Speech is such an ordinary thing – we do it all day every day. And so we naturally downplay the significance of missteps in our speech. But in order to be able to apply the solution, James really takes his time in making us come to grips with the magnitude and urgency of the problem.

So I'll just tell you right up front – this is not going to be the most encouraging sermon you ever heard in your life. This is a passage designed to convict us and to bring us to repentance. We all love to hear happy, encouraging sermons. But the most important thing is not to hear what we feel like hearing; the most important thing is to hear what God has to say. So let's take a look at what He has to say in this passage.

**3 When we put bits<sup>1</sup> into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal.**

We can turn this huge animal just using a tiny little piece of metal.

**4 Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go.**

They had ships – sail boats, that could carry 1000 people – huge ships, and driven by powerful winds. And yet the direction was controlled by a guy sitting in back who turned a rudder that, compared to the size of the ship, was tiny.

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<sup>1</sup> James starts with the analogy of a bridle, and then sharpens that analogy a little further in verse 3 where he specifies the bit. The bit is the tiny little piece of metal that makes the bridle work. It goes in the horse's mouth and applies pressure to the gums. The rest of the bridle just holds it in place and connects to the reins so the rider can control the bit.

## **The Power of the Tongue**

The obvious point here is to illustrate small things that have big power. The rudder is tiny compared to the ship, and the bit is tiny compared to the horse, and both, by themselves, seem like they would be absolutely powerless. And the tongue is the same way. It is small, it seems like it would be powerless to accomplish much of anything, and yet it has staggering power.

### **Power to Hurt**

That old saying, “Sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me” – that would be a really helpful saying except for the fact that it is the exact opposite of the truth. Not only can words hurt you, but they can hurt far more than sticks and stones. Sticks and stones can definitely hurt you, but not like words. Is there anyone here who got hit with a stick or stone more than 10 years ago and it still hurts? You can still feel it? How many of you still suffer pain today from cruel words that were spoken to you 10 or 20 or 30 years ago? Maybe something your parents said to you in anger. Maybe something your spouse said, or a friend, or a teacher. There are people who would prefer to be pelted with 100 stones than to have had to endure the verbal assaults they suffered.

Think of the broken relationships in your life and how much pain that has involved. And in most of those cases – wasn't the fracture caused by words? The little, tiny tongue has massive power to hurt. It also has massive power to influence.

### **Power to Influence**

There are men who would have most likely been the President of the United States if they just wouldn't have said certain words. How did Hitler persuade an entire nation to follow his lead in such unthinkable ways? And how did Churchill steel the courage of an entire nation to stand against him? In both cases – words.

Maybe the greatest example of all of the incredible power of the tongue is the power it has to split a church. Splitting a church is actually a very difficult task. And it would be absolutely impossible without words.

#### **Proverbs 26:20 Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down.**

There is so much love and forgiveness in the church that even if you can start a quarrel, it's hard to keep it going unless you have some gossips in the church to keep throwing fuel on it. But if you do have gossip, it is incredible how much destructive power those people can have. You can take a church family who love one another and worship together and who have close friendships, and rip those relationships to shreds and tear the place apart. Some governments have tried to use guns to destroy churches, and failed. They tried to do it with imprisonment, torture, intimidation, threats – didn't work. But it happens routinely in thousands of churches around the world through the power of the tongue. Words.

But on the positive side, how did that church become a church in the first place? How do people pass from death to life and become saved? Words. They hear a message and believe it.

How did Jesus spend His time in ministry? Teaching and preaching - and then performing miracles to prove the validity of His teaching and preaching.

Howard Hendricks tells the story of an 83-year-old woman he met at a Sunday school convention. She taught the junior high boys Sunday school class, and she came to the convention to try to learn how to become a better teacher. Hendricks later found out that there were 84 young men who were either in vocational Christian ministry, or who were moving in that direction as a result of that woman's influence. And who knows how many thousands of souls will be influenced by those 84 men? The power of words.

Think of the power of encouragement – and discouragement.

What if I asked you to write down the five most encouraging things anyone has ever said to you that you can remember? And then next to each one, the name of the person who said it. Then what if I asked

you to write down the five most painful things anyone has ever said to you? And who it was that said it. That second list would be an exercise in pain. As I think about that, all I can think is, I don't ever want my name to be on someone's second list. But what an accomplishment if your name ended up on someone's first list. In both cases it could have a huge impact on the direction of that person's life.

If you have in your house some automatic weapons, and some sticks of dynamite, and a tank, and your mouth, the most powerful thing in that list is the last one – your mouth.

## Power to Steer

The bit turns the horse, and the rudder steers the ship. I don't think it's an accident that James uses those two illustrations. If you think about it, ships and horses – that is pretty much the sum total of all the things in the ancient world that needed steering. And the steering part is the thing that James points out in both illustrations. The bit and the rudder allow the one in charge to determine the direction that would be traveled. In verse three he states that the bit causes the horse to **obey us**. And in verse four, the ship is steered by the rudder **wherever the pilot wants to go**.

So the point is this – the power of the tongue comes primarily from its ability to set a direction. The bit and the rudder don't provide the movement, but they do determine the direction of the movement. Same thing with the tongue. What you say controls the direction of your life.

The trajectory of your life is determined in great measure by what comes out of your mouth. You can have two people with the same gifts and talents and the same basic goals in life, and those two lives can go in two completely different directions based on their speech. What comes out of your mouth will have an impact on what jobs you get and don't get, what happens to you in those jobs, and even who you end up marrying. It will have an impact on how your kids turn out. Some people have their dream job largely because of things they said. And some people are in prison because of things they said.

There are so many different ways your words can influence the direction of your whole life.

## Wildfire

And not only your life, but also the lives of others. As I said a moment ago, your words have tremendous power to influence others.

**5 Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.**

I'm sure most of you remember the Hayman fire back in 2002 - the largest forest fire in Colorado history.

They could see and smell the smoke over 100 miles away in every direction.

Burned down 133 homes. Five thousand people evacuated.

It cost the state \$40 million to fight, and destroyed another \$40 million in homes, and killed six people – not to mention all the animals that died.

Terry Barton went to prison for starting a fire. She said what happened was she was burning a letter from her estranged husband. Isn't that interesting? She was trying to do away with some words on paper.

And that is such a good illustration of how our words cause so much damage. Did the burning of that one piece of paper hurt anything? No. But it did start a few leaves on fire. That didn't hurt anything either, but it did start a few sticks on fire, and so on. That piece of paper was all done burning in a matter



of seconds. As far as the paper was concerned, it was all over after a few seconds. But the other fires ignited by that little fire raged out of control for months.

That is how sins of the tongue work - influence. You start something up with your mouth, and that gets a bunch of other mouths going. You can stop your tongue at that point, but you can't stop all the other tongues. You can close your mouth and bow out of the whole process and think that it was only a momentary slip. But the wildfire is raging for miles around. But that is what happens with wildfires. They do more damage than you intend. When you speak a hard word to someone or about someone, and do you intend for it to do damage? Yeah, if we're honest we will admit, yes, I was angry, and I did want those words to sting a little. Or if it was gossip, you wanted to influence the person you are talking to against that other person a little bit. But then you calm down, you get over it, you don't say anything else – but there is nothing you can do to stop the chain reaction. Terry Barton might not have intended for all those people to die in all those houses to burn down and all the rest, but whether she intended it or not, she was responsible. And they sent her to prison. You might not intend all the damage that your words do, but if it's your words that start the forest fire, you are responsible. And that is true even if it's just some thoughtless word – something you didn't even mean – a joke or just messing around.

**Matthew 12:36 But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken.**

God holds us responsible for what comes out of our mouths.

## **The Tongue is Incendiary/Evil**

So all of that shows us the power of the tongue. Then, in verse 6, James takes it a step further. He has made the point that the tongue can be a powerful influence for good or for evil. But that is not to say the tongue itself is neutral. A hammer can be used for a good purpose or an evil purpose. You could use it to build someone a house where you can use it to assault someone. But the hammer itself is neutral – it's not inherently moral or immoral. It doesn't have a bias in one direction or the other. But the tongue does. Not only is our speech powerful, but it has an incendiary, destructive, evil bias.

### **A World of Evil**

**6 The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body.**

It is a world of evil. If it is not brought under control, it will naturally do evil, destructive things, not good things. Fire can be a very useful, beneficial thing – but only if it is under control. When it's out of control, it is deadly. Forest fires don't just jump into people's fireplaces, or campfire rings and warm people up and cook their marshmallows while avoiding hurting anything else. Fires under control can do those things, but forest fires don't. The tongue can be used for good or evil, but the uncontrolled tongue is bent in the direction of evil, not good.

### **A Corrupting Influence**

**6 ...It corrupts the whole person**

That word translated **corrupts** is the same word translated **polluted** in 1:27.

**James 1:26 If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not bridle his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. 27 Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.**

True religion bridles the tongue and avoids corruption. But when the tongue is not bridled, it **corrupts the whole person**. Your speech can have a contaminating influence on your heart. Jesus taught that the things that come out of your mouth come from your heart.

**Matthew 12:34 Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.**

The reason you say the things you say is because they are in your heart. But it works in the other direction as well. The way you speak has a huge impact on the way you feel and even what you believe. Suppose someone hurts you and you have anger. If you spend a lot of time talking about what they did to you, that anger will go from being a small, manageable feeling, to a giant, out-of-control monster that dominates your life. But if you have anger and you choose to speak words of love, your heart will be pulled away from anger and hatred.

Another example: Sometimes there is an enticing sin, you don't commit that sin because you know it's wrong, but you do talk about it. You kind of participate in it vicariously by talking about it. That causes your heart to be more and more attracted to that sin, and steers your life in the direction of that sin.

There are so many ways that your speech can influence the direction of your life. Through pessimistic speech and words of doubt you can talk yourself out of trying anything. Through complaining and words of self-pity you can destroy your ability to enjoy God's blessings and drive yourself into depression. By talking about yourself a lot you can move your life in the direction of pride, and isolate yourself from God and alienate yourself from His people. Your speech can corrupt your heart. And corrupting your heart can ruin your life.

## Hellfire

### 6 ... sets the whole course of his life on fire

Think for a second about what James means to communicate by that word picture. What is it like to have a life on fire? What does it mean to have a life that looks like this?



Or like this?



Or this?



Think of what James is communicating when he says your tongue can set the whole course of your life on fire. When we don't control our mouths, the damage we inflict on other people circles back and scorches our lives. James wants you to picture a forest fire and understand – that is what your life will be like if you don't put a bridle on your tongue.

And when he says a life on fire – that is not talking about zeal or passion. It is not the good kind of fire. It is talking about hellfire.

### **6 ... [the tongue] is itself set on fire by hell.**

In Matthew 25:41 Jesus referred to it as **the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels**. It is a place of fire created for the purpose of punishing the devil and his demons, and so James seems to be using it here as a figurative way of referring to the devil himself.<sup>2</sup> The reason our speech naturally has such a negative, evil bent when it is not under control is because of the influence of Satan.

The Greek word for hell came from the valley in Jerusalem where pagans had done all kinds of horrific things, including offering their children as burnt sacrifices. It was considered a defiled place, so the Jews made it their garbage dump. Trash, as well as human waste was dumped there. It was the definition of everything unclean and defiling and gross and disgusting and contaminating. They burned the trash so there was a constant fire going there all the time. And that became the image God used to describe hell.

So for James to say that the tongue gets its fiery power from hell is a decidedly negative description. It is an evil, contaminating, defiling influence driven by the prime enemy of God. James makes that same point again in verse 15 where he points out that the “wisdom” that drives our sinful speech has a satanic origin.

“I'm not going to hell.”

That's great, but you can unleash hell on someone else with your words. You can go down and grab some of the fire of hell and spread all around the church. You can have little hellish compartments in your life where the devil is allowed to live. In Ephesians 4 Paul has a section where he is teaching us about anger and he wraps up that section by saying, **do not give a place to the devil**. That is exactly what holding on to anger will do. It will drive your speech in such a way that there is actually a demonic influence in your life.

And the point of all that is not to just make us all feel bad or to get down on ourselves. The purpose is to let us know – this is an uphill battle. This is one of those areas where, if we just coast, it won't go well. Your tongue is like your car – if it's going full speed, and nobody is driving it, that is not going to end well. James wants us to understand how urgent and important it is that we gain control over our speech.

## **The Tongue Is Unstable**

And that is no easy task.

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<sup>2</sup>The first explicit reference to hell as the current abode of Satan is found in the document known as the Apocalypse of Abraham, which was written after James, but during the same basic time period (sometime after 70 A.D.). So it could be that hell was already being thought of as the home of Satan at James' time.



**7 All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, 8 but no man can tame the tongue.**

God commanded mankind to subdue the creation and have dominion over it. And in large measure, we have done that. We watched a movie last week about some people who were lost in the woods and were being hunted by a gigantic Kodiak bear. And we were just amazed at the things they were able to train this bear to do in the movie. That bear was in several movies – his name was Bart. In Thailand they train elephants to paint paintings of elephants. The things they teach police dogs or Seeing Eye dogs to do - it's incredible. Go to the circus and they can crack a whip and tame a tiger. We can tame a tiger, but we can't tame the tongue. We can train Bart the bear and Lassie and Flipper and Shamu, but we can't get ourselves to just say nice things to each other. Mankind has had far more success in getting control of wild animals than in getting control of its own speech.

## **Restless**

Why is that?

**8 ...It is a restless evil**

The word translated **restless** is the same word translated **unstable** in 1:8.

**James 1:7 The man [who doubts God] should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; 8 he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.**

The tongue is unstable. You try to get control of it, and you find out that it has ADHD. It is like a toddler - it can't be still. You get it subdued, then you turn your head for one second and – boom, off it goes. Our tongues are double-minded.

**9 With the tongue we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. 10 Out of the same mouth come blessing and cursing.**

It is not just the white man that speaks with forked tongue. It is all the men who have tongues. In between cursing people who are made in God's image, **we bless our Lord and Father**. To **bless** God means to acknowledge His worthiness to be honored and thanked and praised. The word **curse** here refers to all the different kinds of things you say to people or about people when you're angry with them.

## **This Should Not Be!**

And James gets emotional here. It is an exclamation: **10 ...my brothers, this should not be!** James is saying, "That's just *so* wrong!" It is so immoral for the same mouth to praise God then curse those who are in His image. It's like if your husband tells you you are beautiful but then sees your reflection in a mirror and says, "Oh, that's hideous." Or if he saw a photo of you and he couldn't quite make out your face so he didn't know it's you and he says, "What a dog she is." Can you see how his complement about your beauty would kind of lose its meaning? We bless God – "Oh Lord, You're beautiful..." But we see His image and likeness, and we speak negatively about that person. How could God possibly enjoy our praises when we are doing that?

**10 My brothers this should not be!**

## **Scandalous Sin**

James wants us to realize how serious this is to God. We have a hard time understanding how serious the matter of sinful speech is, because our speech is just such an ordinary part of life. If someone commits sexual sin, that's really scandalous. If someone does something illegal and goes to jail, that's a big deal.

But in our list of really horrific, scandalous sins, we just don't think tearing someone up with our words really fits in that list. But Jesus did. How could Jesus have put it in any stronger terms than this?

**Matthew 5:21** "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' 22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the High Court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Reckless, unstable, out of control speech is not a little sin. It is not a small matter. But we want to minimize the significance of the sins of the tongue.

"So a few four letter words slip out once in a while – what's the big deal? It's just words."

We come up with all kinds of excuses.

"That's not really gossip – it's a *prayer concern*."

"I'm not complaining – I'm just making observations about reality."

"I wasn't being dishonest – I was just trying to protect them from the painful aspects of the truth."

"I'm not being unfaithful to my word – when I said I would do that, what I meant was that I would consider doing it."

"I'm not angry - I'm just frustrated."

"Those weren't harsh words. It's just my personality – I'm a loud person. I talk this way all the time. God made me a forceful personality – you know, like the Old Testament Prophets. You haven't read the Prophets?"

But none of those excuses fly. Sins of speech are serious sins – especially the sin of cursing one another. Hostile speech, angry speech, derogatory words, gossip, slander, insults, sarcasm – all the various ways we hurt either the person or their reputation with our words. Even the world can see that that's evil. Slander, libel, defamation of character – those things are illegal. Even unbelievers can see that that's wrong.

## Cursing Men

I could go through and give a definition of gossip or slander – we could do a whole Bible study on those topics. But it might be simpler to just think of it this way – think of how you talk about people you really love, and think about how you talk about people you're mad at. Love thinks of people in relation to their best day. Hatred or anger thinks of people on their worst day. If someone starts ripping on someone you really love, you might step in and say, "That's not what he's like. This is what he's like..." and you go on to describe what he's like at his best. You describe them that way because that is the way you think about him.

But when you are angry with someone, it is the other way around. "This is what she's like..." and you go on to describe her at her worst. You describe her that way, because it's the way you think about her.

How would you like to be described? Would you like people to think of you as being defined by the way you acted on your worst day, or your best day? Think of how James described Abraham and Rahab. He described their best days, didn't he? He could've painted a whole lot different picture if you would have picked different events in their lives to describe.

## Venomous

But instead of doing that, what are we to do when we're upset with someone?

**8 ...[the tongue] is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.**

A toddler with ADHD is a handful, but a rattlesnake with ADHD is deadly. Unsupervised toddlers just makes messes and break things. But unsupervised tongues are like poisonous snakes.



As I was studying this, all week I had to keep reminding myself, “This is talking about *my* tongue.” *My* tongue is like this. Just like a snake I have little sacs of venom inside my mouth and every once in a while, I’ll bite. And the poison goes out – and I can’t get it back. Imagine you are out backpacking – three or four days from any medical care, and you get bit by a rattlesnake. But then the snake says, “Oh, sorry about that – my bad.” If snakes could talk, the apology would be nice, but it wouldn’t do anything about the poison moving through your system. James says you need to be careful with your mouth because you have poison in those fangs. Before you open your mouth and start talking about someone who hurt you, don’t forget about the poison. If you can talk about someone, talk the way James talked about Abraham and Rahab. Honor them. Why? Because the people we are talking about bear the image of **our Lord and Father**.

## **Lord and Father**

This is the only place in the Bible where God is called **Lord and Father**. Why does James select that unique combination of titles? **Lord** points to God’s awesome authority and sovereignty. **Father** points to family relationship. James wants to highlight two important ideas: He is Lord, which means He has all authority and absolutely must be obeyed, and He’s our Dad, which means guess what we are to each other – brothers and sisters. How can I bless God as Father while forgetting that His children are my brothers? And how can I bless Him as Lord while ignoring what He has commanded about how to treat others?

## **Siblings**

James was acutely aware of the family relationship we have (he calls us brothers 15 times in this little book). He was a warmhearted man, and he could not stand seeing brothers fighting each other. Sometimes he brings up that topic just out of the blue – like in chapter 5. He is talking about a different topic, and then all of a sudden out of nowhere he says

**James 5:9 Don’t grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!**

Think of the last time you grumbled against someone in the church. Did you have any conscious awareness that you will be judged for that? Some verses in the Bible are so easy for us to forget. But James won’t let us forget, because he keeps bringing it up. James is like Moses, when he saw two Israelites fighting each other in Egypt.

**Acts 7:26 He tried to reconcile them by saying, ‘Men, you are brothers; why do you want to hurt each other?’**

Imagine you are playing a football game and your best blocker spends all his time blocking one of his teammates. James is like the coach going out there and saying, “Why are you knocking him down? He’s on your team!”

## **God’s Likeness**

And beyond that, he bears the image of God. This principle has some application to all people, because everyone is created in the image of God. But that image has been distorted by sin. It is like looking at God’s reflection in the shattered mirror. The reflection is still there, but it’s distorted. But when a person becomes a Christian, God begins to fix those cracks. He begins to conform that person more and more to the image of Jesus Christ.

**Romans 8:29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son**

**Colossians 3:10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.**

So all people are in the image of God, but believers reflect that image in a much greater way. So cursing any human being is an egregious sin against the image of God, but the curse of a Christian is especially serious.

**Luke 10:16 ... he who rejects you rejects me**

**Proverbs 17:5 He who mocks the poor shows contempt for their Maker**

That is true of anyone God has made. When you slander God's image, you slander God. And you can't bless God and slander God at the same time.

## **Conclusion: Jesus' Example**

Well, what's the solution to this disastrous problem that we have? James will teach us that next week, so I hope you can come back. But for now, why don't we just wrap up our time by turning our eyes to the one Man who actually was able to tame His tongue.

**1 Peter 2:21 ...Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. 22 "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." 23 When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.**

Jesus controlled His tongue by entrusting himself to the one who judges justly. Let's follow His example. When someone hurts you, say, "I don't have to retaliate because there is a just Judge who will take care of it." That is hard to do because God has this habit of not conforming Himself to my timeline. And waiting isn't really my specialty. But our Lord Jesus Christ was willing to wait, and that turned out pretty well for Him.

So let's strive to do four things this week:

- 1) Let's wake up to the urgency of putting a bridle on our tongues.  
Let's make sure we don't forget about the poison and the fire and all the massive potential for damage to others and contamination of our own hearts.
- 2) Let's be more alert to the image of God in the human beings around us – it is a marvelous thing.  
And let's be especially alert to the image of God in those people who are hurting us.  
Let's make sure the way we treat those people and talk about those people shows proper honor to the God whose image they bear.
- 3) Let's not forget that our fellow believers are our siblings.  
We have the same Lord and Father.
- 4) Let's follow Jesus example and, when we are hurt, entrust ourselves to the one who judges justly.

**Benediction – Psalm 141:3 Set a guard over our mouths, O LORD; keep watch over the door of our lips. <sup>4</sup> Let not our hearts be drawn to what is evil, to take part in wicked deeds with men who are evildoers.**

**Psalm 19:14 May the words of our mouths and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer.**

## **Application Questions (James 1:25)**

1. Of all the various ways we can stumble with our speech, which one or two do you find to be the most problematic?

2. Have you ever been given some simple words of encouragement that ended up having a huge positive impact on your life?
3. Have you ever seen some harsh words do far more damage than what was intended? If so, (without names) share the story with the group.
4. In the areas where you do pretty well in your speech by God's grace, what advice do you have for those who struggle in those areas?