

The Weight of Our Words, Part 1

James 3:1-5

We're in James 3 today, so if you'd get your Bibles and turn to the book of James and chapter 3. Today we come to a new section in the letter from James. Scholars and commentators alike recognize that in the beginning of chapter 3, James is now transitioning, moving on to a new topic, the topic of Christian speech. However, even though it is a new topic, it's not like it's just coming out of nowhere, and it is consistent, quite consistent with the theme of the book as a whole.

James has just finished, as we've been looking at the last couple of weeks, teaching on the necessity of good works in the lives of those who claim to have faith. And he moves on now into a section devoted to a type of action, a type of work that gives maybe the greatest indication of where one might stand spiritually, if your faith is a true faith or a false faith. Our words, our tongue, the way that we speak—that is what is meant by the word “tongue.” When we see it throughout this passage,

whenever we see it here, it means speech. It's talking about the words that you use, and in this day and age, as we get into this section, I think it's important that we talk about the fact that words that we use today extend beyond mere talking.

As we are thinking through this topic over the next few sermons, as long as we're in this section in James 3, it's important that we think of the implications and the applications of this text, not only in terms of the words that come out of our mouths, but the words that come from our fingers as well through texts and emails and social media, that type of thing. It would be kind of ridiculous to think that sinful words on social media don't apply to this text.

And since there seems to be actually quite a bit of evidence online that many Christians don't seem to believe this, and since there is a good amount of evidence out there indicating that it is actually online and through our text messages where an increasingly higher percentage of our communication is contained, let's just make sure as we enter into this text that we know from the outset that what we are

learning in this passage applies to all of those areas, all of those areas. So don't think that the good application to this text is to hide and say less and communicate online more. The concern is for the words that come from us, from out of our hearts, not merely the words that come out of our mouths.

So this is a passage beginning a new topic, but it is an essential topic when considering the entire theme of the book of James and his concern in helping these early Christians understand what it looks like to live as a Christian. It's actually hard to imagine James setting out to write a letter with that theme in mind and not speaking to the topic of speech. We have seen actually the importance of this topic, the importance of Christian speech already, as it's actually been kind of woven in and out throughout the entirety of the letter, with it actually getting its most extensive treatment here. The danger of the tongue, the danger of careless words, has popped up in a few places already.

It actually comes up in some way in every chapter in the book of James. In 1:13, James warns us to be careful about what

we say about God when we experience temptation. In 2:3-6, we see the issue of sinful impartiality being manifested through the mouth as one tells the rich person where to sit and the poor person where to sit. In 2:16, that we looked at a few weeks ago, we see the sin of someone using words as a form of religious-sounding cover in order to allow them to sound righteous while continuing to live selfishly.

And then even coming out of chapter 3, in the coming chapters, in 4:11 we see the warning against slandering your brother through wrong judgments. Two verses later in 4:13, we see the danger of using our words to presume upon God. In 5:9 we're warned about sinful groaning, so not just your words, but even the sinful noises that come out of your mouth.

And then there's actually quite a bit throughout the last nine verses of the book in chapter 5 that's focusing on teaching us proper forms of speech, proper ways to use the tongue. So there is this sense in which we see in all of the topics in the book of James the ways in which our words will show us to be

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either responding and behaving obediently or sinfully in every area and every topic and every issue that James addresses.

You can also see the unity in the letter through the fact that what we see in chapter 3:1-12 really is actually kind of just an expansion on chapter 1, verse 26; 1:26 is at the end of the section on what it means to be a doer of the word, remember, "one who looks intently into the perfect law" and then makes changes to their life according to what they see. So maybe just look back at 1:26-27 real quick. You can see James ends chapter 1, ends kind of the introduction of the book by saying, "If anyone thinks himself to be religious while not bridling his tongue but deceiving his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. Pure and undefiled religion before our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

So when you look at that verse, you can see that what is said in chapter 2, in all of chapter 2 that we've looked at about sinful partiality, about the necessity of works being with faith, you can see that stuff flowing out of verse 27,

especially when you consider the illustrations that James uses in that chapter. And now in chapter 3, it's almost like he's returning to expand on that statement that he made in verse 26 of chapter 1, but now doing it with the foundation of faith without works being dead and useless firmly planted in the minds of his readers.

So with that now in our minds as well, let's go ahead and read chapter 3:1-12 together. "Do not many of you become teachers, my brothers, knowing that we will receive a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the entire body as well. Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouth so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. Look at the ships also. Though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, they are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot wills. So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things.

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"Behold how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire, and the tongue is a fire, the very world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body and sets on fire the course of our existence, and is set on fire by hell. For every kind of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no one can tame the tongue. It's a restless evil and full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men who have been made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so! Does a fountain pour forth from the same opening fresh and bitter water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can saltwater produce fresh."

A quick reading of this text without really pausing to think about what is being said in the individual verses—maybe this is the case with some of you, this is how I used to think about it—leads to the conclusion that this whole text is really just a warning about how dangerous the tongue is and how much trouble it can cause, and that's really all there is to it. There's illustration after illustration that seems to be

pointing in that direction. And while that is certainly an important part of this section, there is more here than just that. Some people look at all of these illustrations, and a couple of commentators did this, and they kind of lump them all together. They see them all as just saying essentially the same thing over and over and over again. Essentially, the tongue is dangerous. Look out!

But looking closely at the text, you can see that the first two illustrations are actually positive pictures about control, direction, and purpose. And it is really after those first two illustrations that we see James really kind of showing the danger and going into the dangers of the tongue to a greater extent. And then the section ends in verses 9-12 with more illustrations that are meant to kind of tie this section on speech with the overall theme of how the actions of a Christian, particularly speech in this case, must match the confession of the Christian. Faith without works is useless—that type of thinking.

This morning we're going to focus our attention just on this first section that runs from verse 1 through the first part of verse 5. We're going to look at and pay attention to James setting up the serious responsibility of Christian speech, the serious responsibility of our speech. We're going to do that through two points: point number one, the principal responsibility of our speech, the principal responsibility of our speech, or the primary responsibility of our speech; number two, the purposeful restraint of our speech, the purposeful restraint of our speech.

So point one, the principal responsibility of our speech. We want to look at that in verses 1-2. "Do not many of you become teachers, my brothers, knowing that we will receive a stricter judgment, for we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the entire body as well." So James begins this section in what might seem to be an odd way at first, by warning the congregation about the desire to be a teacher, as Travis alluded to earlier. Notice, though, that this isn't a direct warning to the actual teachers in the congregation, although the teachers

and we should learn a lot from this section; it brings a lot of weight to our task.

But the warning is actually more directly pointed to the congregation. The desire to be a teacher at this time seems to have been a problem because it was a position that naturally resulted in respect and notoriety, and that's what people wanted. And there were many teachers, especially in early Judaism around this time, and you can see that in Jesus' little conversations with the religious leaders at that time. You can see that many of these teachers were clearly in it for just that reason: the notoriety, the popularity, the respect.

Remember what Jesus said about them in places like Matthew 23. So just after he tells his followers to listen to the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees because they do sit on the chair of Moses, he says, "Don't be like them, though, because they love to be noticed." He tells them in verses 8-12 of Matthew 23, "Do not be called rabbi, for one is your teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your Father, for one is your Father, he who is in heaven. Do not be

called instructors, for one is your instructor, that is, Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled, and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted."

So Jesus is warning them, warning his disciples against the desire for titles. It's not that there shouldn't be people who hold titles, for Jesus is also the one who, according to Ephesians 4, "makes some apostles, makes some prophets, makes some pastor-teachers." But those whom he gifts in this way are not to be doing it because they want the title, but rather because of submission to the very Lord who has placed them there, and to be good stewards of the gift that he has given them.

So James, here, is making a similar plea to this audience, that not many of them should become teachers. But rather than pointing to the bad example of the wrong desires for the position, as Jesus does, he points to the logical implications of the danger of being a teacher. The desire to be a teacher, to hold that position, should have much less of a hold on

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Christians than it did in Judaism at that time. It shouldn't hold that control over us because Christians now have an idea, we know, we understand the body of Christ. We see what that is, that the one who has saved us through his gospel, Jesus Christ, the one who has united each of us to himself, Christ, who is our head, is also the same one who dispenses spiritual gifts and the one who makes each of us into the part of the body that he has created us to be.

So as Christians come to understand the body of Christ and their place in it, the desire to be a teacher because it appears to them to be more desirable and that they'll get more notoriety should be met with the same rebuke as the one who wants to change genders because the other gender seems more desirable to them. In a similar way that the woman who wants to become a man is rebelling against God the Creator, so, too, would the one who wants to have a position in the body that is different from the one that God has given him be in a similar type of rebellion against Christ, the head of the church, rebellion against he who gave some to be apostles, evangelists, and pastors.

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The point that James is making, here, when he speaks of the "stricter judgment," then, isn't that those who teach have a more important gift. That's not the argument he's making. It's that given the nature of the gift, it opens itself up to a lot more potential damage if the gift isn't developed and exercised faithfully. A teacher is liable for a stricter judgment because the things that one teaches have a greater effect on more people, therefore greater potential for destruction than you find with the misuse of other gifts. And in the end, we know that we will not be evaluated on whether or not we were able to develop our own gifts. We will be evaluated, judged, rewarded, each one of us, no matter what our position in the church, based solely on our faithfulness to the gifts that God has given each of us and the position in the body that he has assigned to each of us at any given time.

There will be, no doubt—Travis just mentioned some of these unfit pastors that we see all over the place—there will be countless faithful men and women, faithful members of churches who never stepped foot in the pulpit or in front of a teaching lectern, who will receive far more treasures in heaven than many pastors, authors, Christian influencers because of the simple

fact that it is God who is evaluating, and he does it according to his criteria, which has nothing to do with the world's perception of what is valuable and what is important. It's according to what he has given you. Are you a good steward of that?

So there is definitely a sober warning for teachers, here, and especially for those who are aspiring to be teachers. It is appropriate to use this text for that purpose. But James is clearly telling those people to really think hard about that, to consider everything about the role before they try to become a teacher. He is doing that, but the bigger thing that he is doing with this instruction is introducing the seriousness of the topic that he is about to cover. The reason that teachers will face a stricter judgment doesn't have to do so much with the position, as it is because of the importance of proper use of the tongue, and the frequency with which they are required to use it makes them liable to stricter judgment. Teachers are judged more strictly because of the overall principle that since words are so important to us, since words are so important, we must be very careful, must be very concerned with the way we use our tongue. And teachers just happen to use words more often and

before more people than others. That's why they are liable for a stricter judgment.

So he's kind of using this statement in verse 1 to say something like, "Words are so important, and they carry with them such great consequence, that if you really understood this principle rightly, the importance of the tongue, if you really understand it rightly, it would cause you to be fearful of the prospect of becoming a teacher rather than desirous of it."

It is important that we understand that James isn't merely giving instructions on teaching here, because there are some who think, a couple of commentaries think that the entirety of this section is a warning to teachers only. And even though, again, even though teachers should definitely pay special attention to it, that's not what James is doing. He's also not, by the way, making a statement that is disconnected from the rest of the section, a totally separate point on teachers before he moves on, as I've heard others teach also.

This is a verse that is intended to be a gateway for the rest of the section, to give it the gravity that James wants it to have. It's meant to help strike the right tone of seriousness as we enter this teaching on the tongue. He's doing actually a similar thing that Jesus does in Matthew 12 when Jesus is confronting the Pharisees. There, also, in verses 33-37, he says, "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good, and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil. But I tell you that every careless word that people speak they shall give an accounting for in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

In that text, Jesus shows the seriousness of the Pharisees' wickedness and culpability in the words that they have spoken, by demonstrating the greater point about how every careless word that people, he says "people," not just Pharisees, that people speak, they shall give an accounting for. He points out the truth that your words will be used as evidence that either

condemns or justifies you in the end. So because of this teaching that is true for all people, the Pharisees are in even greater danger because of how much they're speaking. And just like the application there isn't, "Wooh, well, I'm glad I'm not a Pharisee," then so, too, here, the application is to be, "Okay, wow, if that is the case, I need to take with great seriousness the significance of the words coming out of my mouth."

And in our passage here in James 3, you can see that there is a connection between the example of teachers and this broader point. You can see that connection right there at the beginning of verse 2. He says, "For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the entire body as well." So at the beginning of verse 2, you see the word "for," which connects us to the previous verse. It's meant to kind of fill in the answer for why not many should want to teach. Why shouldn't many want to teach? Because we all stumble in many ways, and your speech is one of the hardest areas not to stumble in. And since that is the case, you might want to avoid a position where you have to speak a lot. It just amplifies the opportunities for stumbling.

So in verse 1 we saw that James included himself in the group of those who teach. It can be translated there in verse 1 as “we who teach,” talking about himself. But now in verse 2, you can see that he is expanding the group who stumble in many ways as “we all, everyone.” We all stumble in many ways. And this is how I used to think of this verse: So if you're in that category, too, you're fine. We'll just come out of it together. But I remember thinking this way and getting myself off the hook so many times when I was younger. “We all stumble in many ways” isn't James saying some variation of, “Well, nobody's perfect,” to kind of show that since it's impossible not to sin, we should therefore expect to sin in our speech, and therefore, since we all do it, it's not that big of a deal, then, right? That is not what James is teaching, even though that is how we use phrases like that all of the time to try to excuse ourselves.

I think one of the greatest evidences of how inclined to sin we are, how wicked we all are, is that one of the primary ways that we apply the truth that we're all sinners isn't to drive us to God for mercy and forgiveness, but to comfort ourselves in the fact that “everyone else is a sinner, too, so I

shouldn't feel so bad about it." How wicked are we that that is what we do with that doctrine. How sinful must we be for us to make one of the primary applications of contemplating our depravity into comforting ourselves.

This is not James's point in saying this. Rather, he is using this truth, the fact that we all stumble in many ways, not so that we won't feel as bad when we sin, but for the exact opposite reason: to cause us to be even more cautious about our speech. "Because you are so corrupt, because you are stained with sin everywhere, because you know that you can and do stumble in many ways, you should have extra caution when it comes to speaking, and maybe especially teaching." That's what he's saying. Because of the fact that by your words you will be justified and by your words you will be condemned, the knowledge that you can stumble easily in many ways should make you extra cautious, then, in your communication. He's not lessening the responsibility in speech; he's actually heightening it.

It is really important that we not read the phrase that way because it also, then, allows us to keep reading the rest of the

verse like that, and then think that all that is being said in the second part of the verse when he says, "If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he's a perfect man, able to bridle the entire body as well," well, therefore, we can think that, "Well, okay, what's being said in the second part of the verse is something that doesn't matter at all. Since only a perfect man can actually keep his tongue under control, since we all stumble in many ways, that means I'm not going to be able to do it, so why bother trying that? And, oh, it looks like I won't be able to control the rest of my body as well." It's very comforting to know.

No, such an interpretation would make this verse essentially useless. It would be useful for nothing other than to continue to help us feel better about not controlling our tongue. There'd be no encouragement whatsoever toward holiness and obedience. If you ever find a passage in Scripture that doesn't encourage you towards holiness and obedience, you're probably not interpreting it right. It is helpful for us as we read this verse, the entirety of verse 2, to think of James' use of the word "perfect" the way he uses it here, and

think of the way, if we can remember way back in verse 4 of chapter 1.

So look back there real quick. Remember what's being said there. We'll start in verse 2: "Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith brings about perseverance, and let perseverance have its perfect work so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." So remember that the point of that verse wasn't saying that "if you persevere well through a time of testing, then you will then become absolutely perfect." No, that's not what's going on there. It's the idea of maturing, of maturity and conforming into the perfect, becoming more and more like the perfect, becoming like the one who is perfect, Jesus.

And that is the word translated as "perfect" in this verse, in our verse in chapter 3. It can be translated as "mature" also. That's how the CSB translates it. But again, in 1:4, that's kind of the implication. It says that this perfection, if you will, this maturity in trials will make you complete,

lacking in nothing. And the way that that perfection looks, the point of that verse, was to show us that if you are able to persevere through trials, and God so does the perfecting work in your life that he gave you this trial for as you respond righteously to it, then if that's what happens, if you can do that, then nothing's going to get to you. If you can take the most difficult trials that God might give to you and use them for nothing but growth and maturity rather than sinful complaining and groaning, using them in the way that God intends to use them, if you can do this, then you have nothing more to fear. No sin in that situation can have dominion over you if you have that attitude, if that is the way you are living through the trial.

So the point of this verse in 1:4 is to spur us on to godly perseverance and trials because we long for maturity. We long to be like Christ. We long to be perfect as he is perfect. It's to point us toward, push us toward the perfect. And that is, by the way, just as an aside, I hope that is what you're doing. A side project as you're listening to Travis as we go through the gospel of Luke is to look how Jesus uses his words, look how he speaks, look how careful he is, look how precise he is, using

the perfect amount of words for every situation, using that, seeing that as an example, the perfect example that you're trying to grow into. Anyway, we want to be like Christ.

So similarly, then, back in chapter 3 verse 2, the point is that we might be spurred on to be those who carefully bridle our tongue because of the reality that if we can do that, what it says in verse two, if we can bridle our tongue, then we can have hope and confidence that we can bridle our whole body as well.

So we know that James isn't saying that it's impossible to control your tongue. We know he's not saying that because he has already said in 1:26 that the one who doesn't bridle his tongue has a worthless religion. So therefore, if it were truly impossible to bridle our tongue, maybe not perfectly all the time, but at least in some real sense of the phrase "bridling our tongue," then we would be without hope. We would have no hope but to have a worthless religion because that's what James says is the case with the person who doesn't bridle their tongue.

So the intent of these verses is to encourage Christians to take this seriously, to go about the work of disciplining your speech because it is of the utmost importance and because of the encouragement that seeing growth in this area, growth in your speech and the way you talk is a sure sign, and confidence and comfort, that you can know that you can have victory over other sin in your life as well. You can see those things put behind you and sanctification in those areas as well. That's the argument from, from the greater to the lesser, here again, the fact that if you can bridle your tongue, you can bridle the other things as well.

And this is the case because sinning with your tongue, when you think about it, is the easiest way for us to sin. It's the easiest way for us to sin, at least outwardly. Thinking is probably the easiest way, our thoughts. But it makes sense when you think about it because everyone, all of us, are at every moment able to commit the worst possible sin that you can commit with your mouth. All of you right now are five seconds away from that. And that's kind of scary, right? You always have the ability to sin as bad as possible in your words.

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This isn't the case with every type of sin; there are restraints and hurdles that you must jump through in order to commit sins as badly as you can in other areas in your life. So if someone wanted to sin as badly as they possibly can in some other way of life that would involve other parts of the body, it would require time, effort, planning, possibly the ability to acquire certain weapons that aren't available to the public.

But that's not the case with your mouth. Right? At any moment, you are literally seconds away from sinning horribly with your mouth. I could be 15 seconds away from totally ruining my family, ruining this church, doing all kinds of horrible damage right from up here. That's scary for you, isn't it? It might take a lifetime of hard work and dedication in other areas, dedication to a certain sinful practice and the need to be placed in the right position to sin as badly as some of the worst sinners in history. But you're always only moments away from sinning as badly as they did with their mouth. You might not have the same audience or influence in your sinful speech, but you can say the same words.

It is so easy to sin in your speech in every way possible because you don't need access to anything else. There's nothing that your mind has to jump through, no real hurdles to get a word from your mind through your mouth. And because of that, it is the easiest way to sin. It's so easy to establish in our lives patterns of gossip and slander and complaining and swearing because you don't need to go anywhere or do anything to start sinning in those ways, no hurdle to jump through, no barrier to get past. You don't have to work your way up to it. You don't have to work up calluses. You can just jump right in. Many sin patterns require you to stop and think about whether or not you're going to sin in this area and then go a little further down the path, stop, think, make another decision. Maybe it requires you, for example, to first pick up your phone, then make the decision to go to a certain website, and then maybe go somewhere where no one else is or wait for people to leave. But you see in that scenario, there's all kinds of places where you can stop, repent, and go the other direction, minimize the damage.

But that's not the case with your mouth. There are no steps, there. So James is saying that since this is the case,

since it's so easy to sin with your tongue, if you're able to control your tongue to not stumble in what you say, then there is no reason that you can't have hope for the bridling of the rest of your body as well. If you can discipline yourself to not sin in the area where it's easiest to slip, or you're always the closest to slipping in there, again, there's no reason why any sin that actually requires more effort and time should have mastery over you.

You can be encouraged as you see yourself growing and really applying this and growing in maturity and sanctification in your speech. As you see that, it should encourage you in the promises of God and his Holy Spirit that you can keep going in all of these other areas, these seemingly more difficult areas. Far from being a verse that should make us feel hopeless about ever being able to see any type of sanctification, any type of victory over sinful patterns in our lives—from being like, “Oh, nobody's perfect, so I can just keep on sinning”—this verse gives us hope that as we see ourselves becoming more sanctified in speech, we can be encouraged that we can be sanctified in every other area of our lives, even the sins that you're thinking of right now: “That one is just too difficult, though.”

So with this understanding of the seriousness of how we use the tongue, understanding the principal responsibility of our speech and the priority with which we are to take the discipline of our tongue, James uses two illustrations, then, to encourage us in the effort. That brings us to point two: the purposeful restraint of our speech. The purposeful restraint of our speech. We see this from verse 3 through the beginning of 5: "Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. Look at the ships also. Though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, they are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot wills. So also the tongue is a small part of the body and yet it boasts of great things."

So James gives two illustrations here that once again should be seen as positive encouragements, positive encouragements for our battle to restrain the tongue. Again, they shouldn't be just lumped into the same category as the dangerous warning of the fire that we see in a little bit. There's actually a bit of a buffer statement there in verse 5 that keys us into some sort of transition taking place. But

also, just thinking about the illustrations, and these were, by the way, common illustrations at this time, used a lot, illustrations of a horse under control, a ship being purposefully guided as it is driven by strong winds, these are positive pictures. These are good things. Horses and boats without riders and pilots controlling bridles and rudders do have the potential to be of great danger when they're out of control. But under control, they are helpful and advantageous for us. They can help us to accomplish great things.

And in that first illustration, we're not to take the illustration all the way to "control of the tongue equals control of the entire body." It's easy to think that this might be what is being said because the bit goes into the mouth of the horse and allows you to control the whole of the horse. The actual point is kind of close to this, but it's not quite there. Controlling the tongue doesn't automatically result in the control of the rest of your body.

So even though, as we said in the previous point, being able to discipline your tongue in righteousness should give you

confidence that you can bring other areas of sin in your life into submission to Scripture also, and there is great encouragement in that, but just controlling the tongue doesn't automatically do all those things for you. You can't say, "I don't understand why I still struggle with being late all the time and making everyone wait on me, because I've gotten so good at controlling my tongue." Right? You should be encouraged that you can grow in control in that area because of the growth you've seen in controlling your speech, but you still have to do that work also.

So James has in mind, here, the connection that the bit in the mouth determines the direction that you are able to move the horse in. So controlling the tongue directs your life one way or another. It can be used to direct your life where you need to go. Your life, the way you move and live, is directed in a very real way by the use of your tongue, the way you speak. The same thing is true in the illustration of the ship. The point is that the tiny little rudder, being pointed one way or another, determines where the boat ends up, determines where the boat is headed.

That's the connection that is made from these illustrations to the tongue. James is directly appealing to that in verse 5 when he says, "In the same way the tongue is a small part of the body and it boasts of great things." So the bit is relatively small, the rudder is relatively small, the tongue is relatively small, but what power, what influence they can all boast of. The horse, the boat, the person—even the person—they're all of no good use, and they're going to veer off course without proper use of the bit or the rudder or the tongue. Your speech, the way you use your mouth, the way you use your words, will be what steers your life in one direction or another. It will be what either leads you on toward obedience and Christ-likeness or into complacency, disobedience, depravity.

Again, it's not just some dangerous thing that we're supposed to learn to deal with in a righteous way, like it's something that's just there, it can always bring our lives into ruin, but we need to learn to make the best of it. It's not like learning to live with a chronic disease. No, God gave us the ability to speak because we're better off for it. It's a gift that he intends for our good and his glory. That's why we have the ability to speak.

These are illustrations that are meant to help us see that while a wild horse, again, is of no good to us and does probably make everything harder, a bridled horse allows us to work more efficiently in the field or arrive at our destination more quickly. And while it would be foolish to board a ship with no rudder and just see where the winds drive you, a ship with a rudder can take you, and actually a much greater quantity of cargo than you could carry on your own, to your destination more quickly, more efficiently. These are gifts that, used rightly, make life better. Similarly, God has given us our tongues so that we might use them well in order to love and serve both him and others better than we could without our tongues, without the use of words.

So notice that what we are saying here is that the idea of being in control of our tongues means so much more than just not sinning with them. It means more than that. And we need to notice that because that's usually what we're satisfied with, what we usually consider to be victory over sin in this area, to stop sinning with our tongue in a certain way. The fact that you have disciplined yourself to remove filthy language and coarse

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joking from your speech, that's great. It's good; you should do that. But that's not the end. That's not enough. You're not done controlling your tongue yet at that point.

If you have slowly and painfully, and maybe with the help of your spouse and other brothers and sisters in Christ, put to death the sins of gossiping or slandering or breaking out in fits of anger with harsh words, if you've done those things, that is great. But that's not the picture of control that we see here. That's kind of the minimum effort that usually satisfies us and lets us think that we've arrived, and we can now move on to dealing with other sins, especially maybe a lot of times when we compare ourselves to others.

But just think about that. So if you're a cowboy—apparently cowboys are the only people I think who ride horses—if you're a cowboy trying to get to a certain town, but something spooks your horse and you find your stagecoach heading towards a cliff, and you regain control of the bridle at the last moment and you're able to get the horse to stop, that is great. But a stopped horse isn't actually serving you and your purpose in a

way that benefits you, right? The goal is to use the horse to get to the town quicker and more efficiently, not to just not be killed by the horse.

That is how we need to think when it comes to the use of our tongues as well. But unlike, again, the negative use of our tongues, the positive use doesn't just happen without any effort. It's easy, again, to effortlessly slip into sinful speaking. It takes effort; it must be bridled. We must make effort to control our mouths, our words. It requires us to be diligent in learning what the best words to use in a given situation might be. It requires us to really think carefully many times before we just start speaking. It might require us to pull the reins back a little bit, slow our speech down.

These illustrations show us that if you will be diligent to discipline yourself, to use your mouth for the purposes for which God gives them to us, then your life will move in the right direction towards him, towards Christ-likeness. With our tongues we're able to, as we have already today, sing praises to God, to confess truths about him, to testify to others about his

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goodness. We're able to share the truth of the gospel with others. We can encourage and admonish our brothers and sisters in Christ with our tongues. The tongue rightly used is a great tool for the growth and the strengthening of the church. In fact, beloved, apart from church members with bridled tongues and disciplined mouths directing their words for godly purposes, this church will not grow at all. It'll just be stagnant. It won't move. It'll just remain the same.

And the same goes for every individual Christian and their individual ministries to others. No step in the right direction is ever made by not doing something. It is not enough to just not do the wrong things. None of your friends, none of your family, none of your coworkers will ever come to Christ because you didn't share a false gospel with them. Your brother or sister in Christ will never be encouraged because you didn't discourage them. They will never be spurred onto love and good works because you didn't slander them. Your children will never learn to treasure Christ and his church because you have never spoken disparagingly about Christ and his church.

That's not good enough. And all of those things that Travis read from in Titus 2 about what we're supposed to be doing in the church, none of that happens if people are just satisfied not doing bad things. Not only will your children never learn to treasure Christ and his church, but in fact, your children will never even learn the importance of not gossiping, not slandering, not swearing, just because you don't gossip or slander or swear. That's not what happens.

Alongside of that example, we need to take control of the bridle or the rudder of our mouth, and we don't just keep it from going where we don't want it to go, but we do the hard work of directing it to where it needs to go. We discipline ourselves to have conversations that are uncomfortable, to positively teach and direct our children. So even though the winds, you know, going to the boat example, would make it easier to just drive the ship in a different direction, we push against it and steer it where it needs to go, not just being satisfied with not wrecking up against the shore.

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We go out of our way to learn the best ways to speak to others in a way that will be the most help to them, so using some Scripture here, learning to use words well in different circumstances, like Proverbs 25:11 says: "Like apples of gold and settings of silver is a word spoken in right circumstances." A positive use of words. And we're careful about what we say because it's dangerous to just fill silence with our voice, knowing that since we will be condemned by our words, it's better to remain silent than to just start talking without thinking, right? Proverbs 10:19: "When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, but he who holds back his lips has insight." Proverbs 13:3: "The one who guards his mouth keeps his soul, but the one who opens wide his lips comes to ruin." We're careful about the way we speak because God intends us to use our words to bring healing and not harm. Proverbs 12:18: "There is one who speaks rashly, like the thrust of a sword; but the tongue of the wise brings healing."

And since we understand the importance of words, then we choose them with great care rather than just throwing a bunch of stuff out there and seeing what sticks. Proverbs 15:28: "The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of

the wicked pours forth evil things." A huge part of faithfulness in controlling our words is that if we really believe the importance of them, then it makes sense that we will ask our sovereign God to help us to have careful and wise speech, as David does in Psalm 141:3: "Set a guard, O Yahweh, over my mouth and keep watch over the door of my lips."

So we can see how all of this works together, then, right? Just as James indicates, if you are taking these things seriously, instructed by these Scriptures, if you are being careful in how you speak, if you're thinking through the best ways to answer people, if you're disciplining your mouth so that the words that come out of it are carefully selected to bring glory to God, to bring healing and life to those around us, if we're working towards these ends, striving for obedience in these areas, then of course we will find ourselves moving along the path of sanctification. You can just see the logic in that, right? Of course you will be.

So then, within the theme of James this fits really well. We can see clearly that our ability to control our speech is a

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demonstration of that true faith and of spiritual maturity. That is true. But the passage is actually saying more than that, isn't it? Controlling our speech isn't just a sign of maturity; it's actually the means by which we attain maturity. When we do the hard work—the hard work—of taking control of our speech, not just for the sake of merely not sinning in our speech, but actually using it as it is intended, as God intended it, we will find ourselves doing the very thing that we need to do in order to gain the spiritual maturity that we all desperately long for.

I remember what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:26-27:

“Therefore I run in such a way as not without aim; I box in such a way as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.” If we would be diligent to not let our tongues off the hook in that verse, in that fight, treat our mouths and the words that come out of us with that same discipline, making every effort, every effort to, to bring our tongues into submission, to make our words into slaves that serve only the purpose of the living God, then we will find ourselves moving in the direction of godliness, growing in sanctification.

We will find ourselves giving effort and changing toward the goal of conforming ourselves more and more to the image of Christ. Those things happen together, the very thing that we are hopefully constantly asking God to do in us and in our prayers. We will find ourselves applying the power that he has promised to us in his Spirit towards the purpose that he has saved us for, our actions and our efforts working in unison with our prayers to bring glory to God and to minister to others.

And as we said at the beginning, as we see growth, as we see victory in this area, the overcoming of sinful practices, and then replaced with these new patterns of holiness, the successful putting off and putting on in this area, as we see this taking place, we can be filled with great confidence in our battle with all other sinful patterns that exist anywhere else in our lives.

Sometimes, beloved, sometimes it is easy for us to move away or dismiss ourselves from this essential battle over our speech, over our communication as we move along in the Christian

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life because we think maybe overall we've really improved from where we used to be, or because we've seen the breaking of a lot of negative parts of sinful speech. And so we've moved on to mainly focus on other areas of sin in our lives that now seem to be more obvious.

Might I suggest that maybe one of the reasons why you might be feeling now that you can't get over a certain sin, that there's one that just seems to have your number, is because you've stopped fighting this battle and are only focused on that battle. I'm not saying that you should just start giving into those sins, to start focusing on the positive discipline of your speech instead of that. I'm saying while you are battling those sins, engage in this discipline also. And when you do, you will find yourself inevitably with more power, more resolve to combat those areas.

Because as we discipline ourselves to, again, merely not use words sinfully, but to go out of our way to use them to speak truths about God and to praise him in times and places where we might not feel like it, or where it takes extra effort,

or to learn how to speak gently in a healing way, to be lovingly confrontational and admonishing, to be disciplined and not just start speaking and just see where it goes, but to slow down and choose carefully the best words for each circumstance; and as we bring our tongue into submission and force it, make it a slave and force it to be the instrument of good that God gave it to us for; then we will find ourselves to be greatly weakening that sinful selfishness inside us that is the fuel of every other sin in our life.

Oh, beloved, I pray that you have been, hopefully, positively motivated towards the discipline of controlling your words through these verses. For added motivation, though, James does go on to point out some negative implications, some consequences if you refuse to engage in this discipline. And we're going to look at that next week. So you'll feel better about next week if you start working on this, this week, just so you know. Let me pray for us.

Father, thank you so much for your Word. Thank you that you teach us clearly through it. Lord, I pray that our church would

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respond well to this passage, to this teaching, that we might discipline ourselves to cast away, to get rid of, all forms of filthy and ungodly speech that might exist—complaining, grumbling, slandering, gossiping, swearing, course joking—all of those things if those exist in us, that we might put them away and then make our tongue a slave to righteousness, that we would apply ourselves to the holy use of the tongue that you created it for, and the work that you created us for. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.