

Introduction: “Faith that saves” is a gracious gift from God. It is an instantaneous, miraculous one-time work of God in which those receiving His gift receive a new spirit, are freed from the penalty of sins, become legally fully justified before God (pardoned), and the Holy Spirit indwells them to guide and enable their transformation into a likeness of Christ. The basis for this incredible gift is Christ’s finished atoning work. Those receiving saving faith, enter a process of sanctification (making holy). They are gradually freed from the presence of sin in their lives (sin nature is conquered). To enable success in sanctification, God gives sustaining faith. Both saving and sustaining faith are evidenced by changed behavior, changed speech, and willing participation in good works. Good works are evidence of the truth of our claim to be in Christ.

In Chapter 3 James focuses on problems and benefits arising from the words people speak. Scripture has a lot to say about speech. For example: Lips speak deceit (Psalm 34:13), the tongue is like a sharp sword (Psalm 57:4), tongues plot destruction (Psalm 52:2), a backbiting tongue brings angry looks (Proverbs 25:23), the tongue flatters (Proverbs 28:23), tongues deceive (Romans 3:13), and the mouth is full of curses and bitterness (Romans 3:14). On the other hand, a mouth of righteousness is a fountain of life (Proverbs 10:11), the tongue of the wise brings healing (Proverbs 12:18), and lips of knowledge are a precious jewel (Proverbs 20:15).

James 3:1-12: *“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ² For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. ³ If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. ⁴ Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵ So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.*

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. ⁷ For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, ⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰ From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.”

Truth in Communication: James’ main point is speech has inordinate power for good or evil. For this reason, believers must carefully guard what they say. What James says about speech applies also to the myriad ways the wonder of electronic devices allows communication today.

Teachers Accountability: James begins his treatment on the power of communication focusing on teachers. Because of their position, teachers are respected and believed. They talk to many people and exert great leverage. Persons involved in activities like news broadcasting, talk shows, making movies, and so forth, have similar and often even greater leverage than teachers. James' warning applies to anyone whose position gives them prestige, leverage, and opportunity to reach out to many people with their message. James admonition is written specifically to believers, but sins of the tongue and sins of other communication methods are charged against anyone who commits them, as is the case with other sins.

James emphasizes that anyone who anticipates becoming a teacher of God's Word should be certain they understand the accountability accompanying that privilege. Teachers will be judged more strictly. They are responsible for teaching God's Word, speaking God's truth in a manner enabling those who hear to understand God's provision and what He expects of them. Teachers of God's Word must not use their role as an opportunity to press their own biases and opinions, but instead must strive to understand and make clear what the Scripture itself teaches.

As teachers, believers are to not only speak God's truth but to model that truth in their own lives. James says, not many should become teachers for we all stumble in many ways. Since everyone stumbles at times and because the tongue is a primary tool in teaching, teachers must master the use of their tongue to the maximum of their ability. Those who teach are to be well prepared, honest about the limits of their knowledge, and keep their tongues under control. The injunction to carefully watch what they say applies to everyone who is in a position of prestige, power, or notoriety making them more likely to be believed. I personally believe all teachers are expected to teach and respect truth and are accountable to God for what they say and do.

What is Speech's Root Problem? When James attacks the sometimes rotten nature exhibited by the tongue, does he mean the literal tongue is the problem? No! The words of our Lord as given in Matthew reveal the hidden but true culprit in sins of the tongue. Matthew 12:33-37 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. ³⁴ You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. ³⁵ The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. ³⁶ I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, ³⁷ for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."* Matthew 15:19 says, *"For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander."*

Ability to speak is neutral. It can be friend or foe. Potential problems lie in the inner person (heart). Speech is a mechanism through which the dictates of the heart are communicated.

Speech Reveals Information About Our Inner Person: As the physical condition of the tongue gives doctors information about the health of our body, so the words that flow from our

tongue give diagnostic information about the status of our inner being. James implies that as words flow from your tongue, they witness to the health of your spirit. Because speech has inordinate power for good or for evil, it must be carefully guarded.

How then do we get words right? Fill our hearts with God's word, and fill our speech and actions with things that delight God. In the Bible the heart is that part of our inner being which contains the principles and precepts by which we live. The best description I know of is to think of the heart as our "mission control center."

As most will remember, when astronauts got into trouble on a space mission, they turn to mission control for information on what to do next. When we need a decision to enable going to the next step, it is from our heart that we receive the wisdom to make that decision. That which is stored in our heart controls our speech, our thoughts, and our actions.

When we think about or do something we know is wrong, our conscience accuses us. When we encounter difficulty, it is our heart that brings forth our reaction to the difficulty. Recognizing this, we must strive to align our heart contents with God's will. One important way to feed the heart correctly is to do as Paul says Philippians 4:8, "*Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.*"

Words have astounding power – power for good or for evil. See Romans 10:9-10 (preaching the gospel), Proverbs 18:21 (power of life and death). Our sin nature is attracted by the power of words. We are especially entranced by the ability of words to build up or tear down reputations, and to destroy or create relationships. Gossip and false rumors spread like wildfire.

Benefits of Controlling our Words: For everyone, controlling the words they use has a beneficial training effect on their inner being – controlling the tongue and the pen promotes control of the whole person. Words are so powerful in their effect that controlling words can be likened to the control the small rudder of a ship exerts over the ship's direction, or to the way a bit in a horse's mouth controls the horse's behavior.

A contradictory flow of words reveals an inconsistent, two-faced person – one instant praising God, the next breath blaspheming Him or a fellow human who bears God's image. This is like a spring producing both salt and fresh water. The salt contaminates the whole flow, making it impossible to know that pure fresh water is present. Just so, our curses overpower our praise.

James 3:13-18: "*Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵ This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.*"

Wisdom: Wisdom is that level of understanding which is sufficient to choose and effectively utilize the right knowledge for a given task. Knowledge provides tools. Wisdom is the ability to choose the right tool for a given task. Wisdom in the Bible sometimes means having the technical expertise or ability to do a job well, but most often it means having the necessary understanding to live life in a manner pleasing to God. Wisdom is necessary to control passions and to direct the general “flow” of our lives. Wisdom guides the use of knowledge.

The most important truth about our knowledge is the way we use wisdom to direct the use of that knowledge. How effectively and “wisely” does our knowledge impact our life? Wisdom that uses knowledge effectively is the key to living a godly life. James says wise men should demonstrate their wisdom by good conduct, doing good deeds in meekness.

A perhaps better translation of Verse 13b is “*Let him show forth his deeds in gentle wisdom.*” Meekness originally meant “gentleness” or “humility.” It was a term that was often associated with bringing a high-spirited horse under control. So to bring a person’s high-spirited life-style under control of godly wisdom enables doing good deeds with which God is pleased.

The Danger of Knowledge Without Wisdom: Knowledge without wisdom has risks similar to trying to use power tools without understanding their proper use and limits. It can do a lot of damage. Knowledge without wisdom may fill the heart with ingredients of bitter jealousy and selfish ambition arising from envy. Envy and jealousy are opposites. Envy is an emptiness wanting to be filled, while jealousy is a fear of losing something already possessed. Both envy and jealousy lead to disorder. By disorder James means more than just confusion. He means disharmony in relationships, antagonism, and the absence of unity and stability.

Be of Good Moral Character: Do good deeds in the humility or meekness that comes from gentle wisdom. In other words, be of good character! Don’t be two-faced or try to pretend to God to be what we are not. Be totally open with God, have a true inner consistency. Humility and meekness are not weakness. If what we are is not pleasing to God (or to us), the good news is that God is in the business of transforming believers to holiness.

Worldly wisdom views self-gratification as top priority. That view causes desires to become passions which drive behavior. For example, the desire to acquire things tends to make people covetous. Covetousness leads to viewing people as tools to use in getting whatever is desired. If a person is not useful in satisfying desires, the inclination is to let that relationship die. Even communion with God is affected. Communion with God dries up when He is approached with wrong motives and doubts. Believers can become convinced that following Christ need be no hindrance to pursuing worldly desires.

Earthly wisdom allows human feelings and human reason to reign supreme. On the other hand, wisdom from heaven is truth derived from God’s revelation. It is morally pure (in action and motive), is tranquil or peaceful (helps heal relationships rather than tear them apart). It does so with gentle, controlled strength. It is open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial

and sincere. Every believer is expected to use wisdom to live a life pleasing to God. For believers, wisdom, derived from God's revelation, must take precedence over wisdom derived from earthly sources. Anyone who lacks wisdom from above should ask God who gives generously to all without reproach. Knowledge without godly wisdom tends to fill hearts with ingredients which produce bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. Selfish ambition often arises from envy. Envy and jealousy are opposites. Envy is an open hand wanting to be filled. Jealousy is a tight fist holding on lest something be lost. Continuing this train of thought, James now more generally considers quarrels and fights. First an indictment of bad behavior, and then a call to repentance.

James 4:1-10: *“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ² You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. ⁴ You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”? ⁶ But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” ⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.”*

The Problem with Desire: James doesn't pull any punches. He says undisciplined, unrestrained desire is at the root of most wrongdoing. Cicero, the great Roman statesman, made a similar diagnosis. Cicero wrote, *“It is insatiable desires which overturn not only individual men, but whole families, and which even bring down the state. From desires there spring hatred, schisms, discords, seditions and wars.”* Cicero was not a believer, but he was wise in the ways of the world. Scripture tells us Cain killed his brother Abel in a fit of jealous anger. Most homicides today continue be results of unrestrained passions.

God's Provision: When God redeems a person, He gives them a new nature. That new nature gradually makes itself manifest in life, changing what the new believer says and does. These changes, as Paul tells us in Romans 12, are a result of our inner person being transformed through the renewal of our minds. The purpose of transformation is holiness.

Attaining holiness is a battle, but a battle God has made possible for us to win. As we saw earlier, two opposing wisdoms struggle in redeemed hearts. Worldly wisdom encourages selfish ambition, envy, jealousy, disorder, and other evil practices. Wisdom from above encourages behavior that is considerate, peace loving, submissive (reasonable, willing to listen, not

uncorrectable or hard-headed), merciful, full of good fruit, and sincere (unfeigned). The struggle to overcome effects of worldly wisdom is a continuing fight never completely won in mortal life.

Wisdom from Above: Wisdom is the ability to effectively guide the use of knowledge. We experience earthly wisdom and wisdom from above. Wisdom from above is available to every believer. If a believer lacks wisdom they are to ask God who gives generously to those who ask from genuine desire. Wisdom from above is pure and pleasing to God. It is peaceable toward other people. James says to his readers, as believers who have the light of wisdom from above, what reason do you have for fights and quarrels with other believers? He continues by saying, isn't it true that conflict with fellow believers arises because we flirt at being friends with the world, being seduced by worldly wisdom? When we are trapped by worldly wisdom, we have a wrong understanding of ourselves and of our relationships with others.

Worldly Wisdom: Self-gratification is top priority in worldly wisdom. Desire to acquire things tends to lead to covetous. Covetousness can lead to inappropriate actions to acquire that which is desired. Worldly wisdom focuses on pleasing, protecting, and promoting self. Worldly wisdom opposes and struggles against wisdom from above.

Avoiding Conflict: We all face the same temptations to worldly desires. How is conflict with other believers to be avoided? Even the faith that binds us together in Christ can lead to conflict between believers because of their different interpretations of God's word. How then do we maintain communion with God and peaceable relationships with others? The truth is that it is impossible for us to accomplish alone. But we are not alone! The Holy Spirit indwells each believer and joins us all together in the family of God.

God does not give up on us. The Holy Spirit indwells us, and in our need God gives us more grace. It is God's grace alone which makes it possible for us to walk consistently with Him, just as His grace alone made us His children in the first place. Grace is God's gift to the humble. To walk right with God, we must be humble before Him. What does that mean? James says that being humble before God means submitting to Him. We are to be in complete submission to God's commands. He promises us grace to resist worldly enticements. Submission is not to be a passive "what-ever" kind of thing, but, rather, like a soldier, active and prepared, we are to submit to His authority and eagerly await what He next requires of us.

Instructions for Drawing Close to God: *"Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you."* As believers we can approach God directly. When we make it a priority to commune with God, He draws near to us. When we are tempted, the right response is to resist (1 Corinthians 13:10).

James tells us to cleanse both our outer life (the actions of our hands and the words of our mouths) and our inner life (the thoughts of our hearts). *"Cleanse your hands"* is a command emphasizing stopping individual sinful acts. *"Purify your hearts, you double-minded,"* is a command emphasizing removing an inner attitude of disloyalty to God.

When we genuinely repent, God will lift us up. It is true that God must enable, but it is also true we must work cooperatively with Him. It is not possible to live a consistently godly life in our own strength. But God is gracious and will strengthen us to be able to do what He requires. We can resist evil and practice righteousness, but only within the grace and mercy of God.