

# JAMES—WEEK 3

## FULL CHRISTIANITY



F. Michael Slay

*A DEEP Study*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

*The Cover Picture is St James the Minor by Peter Paul Rubens (1577 – 1640)  
On display in the Museo del Prado in Madrid, Spain*

In this section, James gets to practical application. First off, we have a problem with our tongues. Speech gives us super-powers—for good and evil. Wisdom does the same. And covetousness ruins everything.

Therefore, submit to God and stop being a hedonistic half-Christian.

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T. M. Moore, Principal  
[tmmoore@ailbe.org](mailto:tmmoore@ailbe.org)

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1 James 3:1–5a

*My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things.*

In his 2016 book *The Kingdom of Speech*, Tom Wolfe (bestselling author of *Bonfire of the Vanities* and *The Right Stuff*) says:

*Speech is 95 percent of what lifts man above animal! ... In hand-to-paw, hand-to-claw, or hand-to-incisor combat, any animal his size would have him for lunch. Yet man owns or controls them all, every animal that exists, thanks to his superpower: speech.*

Speech makes man the apex predator in every land and every sea, despite being slow and without sharp teeth or claws. But why? How?

Mainly because of one thing we can do with speech—teach.

So, we allocate great resources to teaching. Using the gift of speech, we teach children to read (an extension of speech). Then we move on to mathematics and science. The result is impressive. Pre-adolescent children already have amazing levels of understanding of the world. No animal even thinks in those terms.

Thus, it's impossible to explain the gospel to an animal. You can't *explain* anything. Because they don't have the gift of speech, there's no such thing as *explain* in an animal's world.

So, James is onto something big in today's passage. Speech is power, and that power is most manifest when teaching.

Like the rudder on a boat, the tongue has the power to control things much larger than itself. But what larger thing does the tongue control?

Others.

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Nowadays, the power of the tongue can be literally amplified by a microphone, or even more so by the printing press or, yikes, the internet.

The tongue gives a teacher the power to alter the course of a student's life. They almost can't avoid that.

But mass communication gives the speaker the power over everyone. A speaker or writer can alter the course of civilization.

The pen truly is mightier than the sword.

2 James 3:5b–12

*See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.*

This isn't about the organ we use to taste things with; it's about speech. The Hebrew word for tongue (לְשׁוֹן, la-shone) is often used as an idiom for language, just as “native tongue” is in English. Equating “tongue” with speech goes way back.

The previous passage noted the power of speech, but this one goes much further. That power is evil.

But it's not really the power that's evil; it's the sinful person wielding that power. That's the secret behind this famous quote.

*“Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely.”* — Lord Acton

Brilliant, but I prefer this modern version by the author of the legendary work, *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*.

*“Power corrupts; PowerPoint corrupts absolutely.”* — Edward R. Tufte

In both cases, a tool simply makes manifest what was hidden.

The corruption (sin) was always there.

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The high point of this passage is, *“My brethren, these things ought not to be so.”*

James is referring to how the same tongue *we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God.*

This dual use is creepy. James wonders how this is even possible.

*Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs?*

James is asking, “What's wrong with this picture?” His point is that we should see this as a contradiction. That contradiction challenges the validity of when we *bless our God and Father*.

This is on the same level as, *“Faith without works is dead.”* Here, praising God is dead if we curse men with the same tongue.

3 James 3:13–18

*Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.*

James uses two Greek words, “wise” (σοφός, sophos) and “understanding” (ἐπιστήμων, epistemone) here because the Hebrew language (and, thus, the Israelite culture) is so nuanced on this topic, and he wants to be clear.

No words can do this justice though. There are lots of different kinds of smarts and lots of kinds of wisdom too. They’re all useful, but our sinful nature gets in the way.

Knowing, say, how to treat a burn is genuine wisdom, as is knowing how to sharpen an axe. People with this kind of wisdom can be very useful—or very annoying if they think this makes them better than other people.

And that’s James’s point here. Wisdom can get *competitive*. You can use your wisdom to help people—as your *works are done in the meekness of wisdom*.

*But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts*, then it all goes wrong. *This wisdom does not descend from above* (the practical wisdom lacks spiritual wisdom), and so it is *earthly, sensual, demonic*.

That’s shocking. Sure, self-promotion isn’t admirable, but demonic? That seems a bit over the top.

So, James backs up his extreme assessment.

*For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there.*

Sin ruins everything, even something as beautiful and important as wisdom.

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Henry Kissinger famously said, "*Academic politics are so vicious precisely because the stakes are so small.*" He was paraphrasing Sayre’s law, which states, "*In any dispute the intensity of feeling is inversely proportional to the value of the issues at stake.*" Sayre adds, "*That is why academic politics are so bitter.*"

Money, fame, and good looks are the main status symbols in our society, but wisdom connotes status in some circles. A university faculty lounge is definitely one of those circles.

This can get insanely annoying. Fortunately, it’s not universal. In my experience, the most illustrious professors don’t seem to have a chip on their shoulder. And the seminary professors I’ve known don’t have this disease at all. They’re *peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits*.

They love their students instead of themselves.

4 James 4:1–6 (NIV)

*What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.*

*You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says:*

*"God opposes the proud  
but shows favor to the humble."*

Having just explained how our sinful nature can turn even something as wonderful as wisdom into something *demonic*, James now zooms in on that sin.

*What causes fights and quarrels among you? Covetousness. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight.*

Good old commandment #10—the one no one talks about, the one you can't see.

*"You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor's."* — Exodus 20:17 (NIV)

This is the hidden sin. Out of sight, out of mind, right?

Not really. The quarreling makes it obvious.

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But then James digs down to the root cause. *You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.*

The lesson here is simple but subtle. We have to let our relationship with God be what it should be—the relationship between a created being and its creator. We need to quit the rat race and let God run His universe His way. Life is not a competition. The trick is to relax. Consider this.

When we pray, do we sound like we're talking to the author of space, time, matter, and energy (not to mention ethics, mathematics, and love)? Or do we sound like we're talking to Santa Claus?

We need to stop trying to shoulder the load of being God. That's not our job. This is the point of:

*"God opposes the proud  
but shows favor to the humble."*

5 James 4:7–10

*Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.*

Now James turns to the practical details. “*Therefore*” here are the things you should do.

This is a long and detailed list, but the first item is the key. *Therefore submit to God.*

The Greek word translated as submit (ὑποτάσσω, hoo-paw-tass-oh) literally means be a subject of. That is, it’s not about submitting right now; it’s about putting yourself permanently under someone’s authority.

And the Greek word translated as resist (ἀντίστημι, an-thi-stay-me) is, likewise, not in the moment. It means “set oneself against.”

So the first two sentences, which are one verse in Greek, get us back to basic long-term lordship.

Being 100 percent committed to Jesus as lord of your life drives the enemy away.

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This is what the book of James has always been about, and now he’s getting down to the nuts and bolts. The next three verses assume the first one. This is practical advice for committed Christians.

“*Draw near to God,*” is a command to move away from worldly pleasures toward God centered activity, such as prayer and daily devotionals. James promises that if you seek an intimate relationship with God, you’ll get one.

The command to “*Cleanse your hands,*” is reminiscent of the washing priests must do before they can approach God. The command to “*purify your hearts,*” is reminiscent of what Jesus said about Pharisees.

“*For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence.*”  
— Matthew 23:25b

James is insisting that the internal match the external. The Greek word translated as double-minded (δίψυχος, di-psoo-khos) is “di” (two or double) prefixed on the Greek root of “psychology.” Here it refers to people who want to have it both ways—love the Lord while still loving worldly pleasures.

And then James slams the door on this. *Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.* Wow. Is James saying that Christians shouldn’t be happy?

No. He’s calling out the double-minded—the “Christians” who haven’t yet given up being party animals.

This is pretty much the theme of the whole book. Being a half-way Christian isn’t being a Christian.

You have to be all in, or you’re not in. *Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.*

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. Did a teacher change your life?
2. How can we avoid errors of the tongue?
3. Have you had annoyingly egotistical professors?
4. Our society is all about coveting. How can we evangelize in that environment?
5. How can we get half-way Christians off the couch?