

1. My lesson title is "The danger of gossip". If this is an issue that you think is not that significant in your life right now, my job is to show you how and why that is significant. In this chapter, James starts by focusing on teachers as they have more responsibility to prevent that from happening. Then he focuses on the rest of us, and why gossip is an issue to be discussed and avoided.
 - a) If I had to pick the one sin that I believe does the most amount of damage, I would argue that the sin of gossip wins that award. While murder hurts one's family and friends in a deeper way, that sin does not occur as often. However gossip is so common even in our church settings, I can easily make the case that gossip is the most common sin that people have to deal with. I believe that is one of James' key points in this section of his letter.
 - b) I'm also want to warn you that this lesson is going to get very personal for my family and myself. We are currently going through a situation where the possible damage caused by gossip is worse than the incident that spurred the gossip in the first place. Hopefully by the time you read this lesson that particular situation has come to an end. My point is not to share aspects of my own life with you, but to warn of the dangers caused by gossip.
 - c) This leads to the other key personal point about this lesson. If one is going to be a teacher of the bible, one learns quickly, that God judges you harder than if you were not a teacher. What I have learned over and over again is that God puts me in situation that helps me to relate to the text I am currently supposed to teach. This lesson is no exception. What I am currently dealing with is not only a good example of the dangers of gossip, but also shows how God intertwines events of my life with what I teach. After talking to others who also teach the bible, I have discovered others get this connection as well. God appears to take the events of our lives and use them to help with what we teach in His word. If one ever wants proof of God's existence, teach the bible for a while, and watch how one's life does interact in amazing ways with what one teaches.
 - d) Meanwhile, back to the issue of gossip. This is the sin of essentially the spreading a story about someone without actually talking to the person who the story is about. If someone tells you something about another person that is not a positive thing, the proper response should always be, what did they say when you confronted them about that situation? My second best response is just to walk away. Again, I have seen more damage even within the Christian body caused by gossip than I have by any other sin that one can imagine.
 - i) While other sins can do more physical damage, other sins are not as widespread an issue as gossip and that is my point and James' point here.
2. All of that ranting about gossip does lead me back to this chapter. This is a short chapter of only eighteen verses. It is tempting to cover two chapters at once here. However there is a lot to say about the issue of gossip and how it affects our relationship with Jesus. If this entire chapter is a lesson about being careful about gossip, then one misses the main point of this lesson. The point is we need to give to God our tongues. I'm not saying we have to literally remove them, but just in effect to pray our way through what we say and be careful what we say.
 - a) This is a lesson where we literally have to constantly remind ourselves of the danger of spreading rumors without actually talking to the source about what we say. I know that it has affected my own life on many occasions as well as the lives of those I love. That is why spending a little time, dealing with the issue of what we say, is worth dedicating a whole lesson to this topic. If I can prevent one person from spreading a rumor, or help to heal someone who is dealing with the damage done by the spreading of gossip, then this lesson was worth writing. Even if one is not dealing with that issue right now, I promise that learning about this issue will help us in future situations on that topic.
 - b) With that convicting introduction completed, we can start Verse 1 of this chapter.

3. James Chapter 3, Verse 1: Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.
- a) To explain Verse 1, first we have to discuss it in context of the previous lesson, and also to understand what was a teacher back then as well as today.
 - b) Let's start with context: In the last part of Chapter 2, James is saying that that we should not just say we are Christians, but do something about it. Since the original letter did not have any chapter breaks, know that this topic leads directly into the topic of Chapter 3.
 - c) With that said, let me discuss how teachers functioned at that time. There were no formal schools back then. The literacy rate during the time of the Roman Empire was probably at about 10% to 15% of the population, according to the historians I have read.
 - i) I also read that prominent Roman families would hire tutors to teach their children about the world. Since there was no formal school system, people had to learn on their own what they wanted to learn. Also know that throughout history, Jewish families were taught the bible by hearing the bible in their synagogues and in their "Sunday School". It was only the Jewish Rabbi's that got a true formal education in writing and teaching the bible.
 - ii) This lead to teachers within the early church. As I explained, the literacy rate was not high in the Roman world. Those that were Christians and preferably did have the ability to read the text were often teachers in the early church. One also has to remember that there were no churches for the first few centuries. Christians meet in homes or in the case of persecution, in secret meeting places. One also had to be cautious about strangers as during the times of persecutions, there were those that tried to turn in Christians to the authorities.
 - iii) Even with all of that background, it still took a desire to want to be a teacher. One has to put in a lot of hours to prepare and often like today, there are very few that make a great income from being a bible teacher. One usually becomes a teacher of the bible because as I put, one cannot stand not doing it. It is often referred to as a calling. I believe God puts it into the heart of some to become bible teachers.
 - d) As to this verse, the point for us is if one desires to be a bible teacher, one has to be careful what one says. We need to understand that God holds teachers to a higher standard than other believers because what teachers say has a great impact upon Christian believers.
 - e) All of that leads me to a discussion of the phrase "presume to be" for a moment. If one had to think of the most dangerous job one could imagine, maybe a person who has to defuse a bomb or maybe one who works on constructing high-rise buildings. My point is to be a teacher is not something I would ever consider that the bible warns out about not taking lightly. One would think that one just tries it for a while, and if one is not good at it, if no one is willing to listen to us talk, that is a sign that we are not to be a teacher.
 - i) However, James point is different. His is that if we presume to be a bible teacher, it is more than just the physical skills to be a teacher or having a willing audience. The issue is that we as teachers will be judged harder than other Christians. I am not sure what that entails, but to be honest, it scares me a lot.
 - ii) I think of it this way. If we are going to spread the gospel message to others, then God holds us more accountable than those who don't spread that message. If we are going to teach His word to others, we are held more accountable than the type of person who is involved in some other ministerial work.
 - iii) In the Gospel of Matthew 23:10, Jesus Himself said that we ourselves should never be called teachers, as God is the only teacher. That is why in many churches, they only use terms like "brother" or "pastor" and not the word teacher. By the way, the Hebrew word "rabbi" simply means teacher. So when we teach the bible to others, are we teachers or not? Yes we are, but Jesus' point is simply that we should look to God as the one teaching others and not our skills to be a good teacher.

- iv) I still remember vividly the first time I taught the bible. I remember sweating and not doing a good job at all teaching the bible. To this day I feel bad for the people who had to sit through what I had to say. Thankfully those were wonderful folks who put up with me and let me grow as a teacher.
- v) What if one says, "I am not a good speaker, or I don't make great eye contact, or I speak too fast or too slow?" Then one has to recall what God said to Moses when he was called to be a speaker before Pharaoh. Moses said that he was not a good public speaker. God then reminded Moses who made his tongue in the first place. When he still refused to be a speaker before Pharaoh, God then agreed to work on Moses' level and allowed his brother Aaron to be the spokesman. Still, Moses was still the one that God called to communicate with Him what was His will for the Israelites at that time. This is based on Exodus, 4:9-11.
- vi) The point of me saying all of this is that to be a teacher is a calling by God. One will know if one is called to be a pastor or teacher or whatever function, I believe simply because one cannot stand not doing it. If one does not have the education to be a teacher, one gets that education. If one does not have the physical skills to be a great communicator, one works on that skill. One teaches the bible, not to get the approval of others nor for the financial rewards, but simply because one wants to pass on the knowledge of Jesus to others. To put it another way, one teaches in order to spread the word about Jesus to others, and not for any personal benefit.
- f) Finally, let me discuss the work involved and getting past the intimidation factor.
 - i) Another reason James says that let not many of us presume to be teachers is that it requires a lot of hard work and sacrifice. Just because one is called to be teacher, does not mean it comes easy or without a lot of sacrifice. I put a lot of hours into this ministry work and it is a big sacrifice to my family. I have also discovered that God rewards that hard work and helps to clear my schedule so that one does have the time to do other functions that one needs to do or just enjoys doing.
 - ii) One can apply that principal to whatever type of service for God one loves to do. I have yet to meet one devout Christian who doesn't work hard in order to make a difference for Jesus with their lives. Making that difference often requires a lot of personal sacrifice of one's time to make that difference. My point is the cost that is associated with that time commitment God then makes it up to us in other ways. It is the classic expression of "one cannot out give God". It is as if He gives to us with his left hand what he takes away with his right, which is another expression. This does not just apply to our financial giving, but also the time that we put in to make a difference for Jesus. Being a teacher is simply one example of that concept.
 - iii) Let me quickly discuss the intimidation factor. When I first started this ministry, I would read and listen to commentaries by brilliant, well-educated scholars. I then came to the conclusion I could never be as great as them. Why should I teach the bible when there are more brilliant people than me who do the same thing? God's answer was in effect that He is calling me to reach people that they aren't reaching.
 - iv) My goal is to reach out to other believers and to tell them to not be intimidated by what others have already accomplished for Jesus. The role each of us is called to is unique from what others before us have already done. Remember that it is not the size of the ministry that counts. It is whether or not we are being loyal to what it is that God has called each of us to be involved with.
- g) OK, I've now been ranting for two pages on this one verse. That is because it has meant a lot to me personally both in my growth as a Christian and my ministry work. My goal is not to educate you on my life as much as it is to understand that just because God judges teachers more strictly, should not prevent any of us from fulfilling the calling that He has given us to be a teacher or for whatever ministry that He is calling each of us into.

4. Verse 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.
- a) When James says we all stumble in many ways, that is his way of saying that no one is perfect. Whether or not one is called to be a teacher, or whatever role one wants to take on in making a difference for Jesus, we all make mistakes. The point is just because we are imperfect people, that should not prevent us from doing what we are called to do in the first place. One of the main points that this chapter is going to make is that we are to rely upon God's power in order to make that difference for Him and not our own power. Where we all make our biggest mistakes is usually when we rely upon our own strength and ability to do what God has called us to do and not His power. That is why I always say that I rely upon the prayers of others and my own prayers in order to teach. When I am teaching well, it is not me, but God working through me. Hopefully each of you can say the same thing in whatever ministry role one feels called to do.
 - b) This leads to an important and hopefully brief discussion: What if I have no idea what I am supposed to do? What if I don't feel lead to teach? What if I am really in a lot of pain at the moment and I can barely take care of myself let alone make a difference for others?
 - i) First, remember the biblical expression, "this too shall pass". God never expects us to do anything we can't handle. If one is dealing with say, the death of a loved one or is really sick at the moment, God does not expect us to say, go out and teach.
 - ii) If you knew you were going to die, say exactly a year from today, what would you like to do knowing that God is going to judge us based on whether or not we have used our life to make a difference for Him? Understand that this is not a salvation issue. It is about what we should do with that salvation that God has given us.
 - iii) If one has no idea what to do, I would start by praying about how one can be used by God. Pray something like, "I am Your servant, how can I use my life to make a difference for You". I have found that God can't resist that prayer, and He leads us down a path so that He does that answer that prayer His way and on His timing.
 - iv) If one is still confused, try doing different things around one's church or even say around one's home. Take steps that one believes God is leading you to do. Then one will be surprised where that takes you. I have had a privileged life and I have been blessed with lots of different things. However, I can look back at my life and realize that the greatest sense of joy that one has is one when one realizes that one is being used by God in order to make a difference for Him. That doesn't mean I don't love my family or some other aspect of my life. I am just saying that there is a need in all of us to worship God, and doing something of service to Him is one of the greatest ways to fulfill that need that exists within all of us.
 - c) All of that does lead me back to these verses. The point is that God does call each of us use our lives to make a difference for Him. Just because it is up to Him to guide us, does not mean we don't have to work hard at whatever it is we are called to do. That is why James is saying us to "keep our whole body in check" as it says in this translation.
 - i) The idea is that it starts by trusting that God can work through us. Then comes the idea that if we accept that He is working through us, then we can and should work hard in order to make that difference for Him. Again, it is not by willpower, but trust that He is working through us to make that difference.
 - ii) The issue of keeping our body in check is that it is always easy for our ego's to get in the way of making a difference for Him. Too much flattery is always a danger as then we think it is us and not God working through us. We also need to know that it is not up to us alone, but God working through us collectively in order for all of us to make that difference for Him. That is how Christianity "works".
 - d) Now that I've beaten that point to death, we are ready to talk about James and "tongues".

5. Verse 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.
- a) Here James gives us two illustrations about how a small thing can control things that are much larger than the controlling factor. A bit in a horse's mouth helps to control how that animal moves. A rudder on a ship helps to steer that ship despite the winds that may be blowing at any given moment.
 - b) The point that James is getting to beginning in Verse 5, is that our tongues are not a large part of our body, but in effect it does control over the actions of our lives. To state what is obvious, thoughts begin in our heads, and the tongue is just reacting to what we want to communicate in our heads. When one reads about the tongue here, he is not saying that the physical tongue itself is to blame, but the thoughts being physically communicated.
 - c) Let me quote something Jesus said on the same topic. Jesus said it is not what goes into our mouth that defiles us, but what comes out our mouths. That is from Matthew 15:11. Jesus point and James point is in effect one and the same. The idea is to be careful what we say as that is riskier to our relationship with God than the food we put in our body.
 - d) Before I get into all of that, let me come back to these two verses. Having a trained horse is no good unless one takes it out and rides it. That bit is how the horse is controlled. A ship is no good sitting in dock. It is meant to be sailed and that rudder controls the ship.
 - i) The point is not that God wants us to keep our mouths shut all the time. If He did, my lessons would be a lot shorter. ☺ The point is that we should be careful what we do say and rely upon God's power to say the right thing.
 - a) Does that mean we never mess up? Of course not.
 - b) Does that mean we have to pray before every thought comes out? No.
 - ii) It just means that we should pray regularly for God to watch over our lives and even to remember to pray that God be in control of what we say and even of what we don't say. I stated in the last lesson that the best idea I have heard for an 11th commandment is to "think before one speaks". I just know is that I could have had a lot less grief in life if I have thought through what I have said before speaking.
6. Verse 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.
- a) James uses another analogy here that most of us understand. Just as a small fire can cause a lot of damage, so saying the wrong words can cause tremendous amount of damage.
 - i) As to fires, I can think of a number of classical historical examples of large fires that were caused by simple incidents, but I suspect most of you have your own stories that you know about big fires. No need to go on about that issue.
 - ii) As to speaking, I keep thinking of the classical children's line that goes, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." The problem is when we get older, words do hurt and do cause damage to our lives. That is why I said in the beginning of this lesson that I am convinced there is more damage done in this world due to gossip than any other sin one can imagine. When we pass on stories about other people, we don't stop to think about the damage we do to that person when we spread that story. The excitement of sharing a piece of gossip is usually a far greater urge than to consider the potential damage being done.
 - b) OK, so other than saying, "keep your mouth shut", what is the point here? Again, it does come back to the idea of relying upon His power to control what we say, and not rely on our own willpower. Let's be honest, sharing gossip gives us some sense of fulfillment or joy or else we wouldn't share that in the first place. It's not a matter of saying, "OK, John keep your big mouth shut", it is praying to God to help us control our tongues.

- c) To say this another way, God's power is greater than our willpower. One of the themes that runs through the entire bible is how sooner or later, our willpower will fail us. That is what God wants us to realize. Instead of just giving up, it is about trusting in Him in order to get us through life. That in effect is what living the Christian life is all about: Trusting in His power to help us through the situation of the moment and not try to rely upon our willpower.
- i) To give an example, I am currently dealing with a situation regarding issues in my own family, and I don't know what to do next. I have talked to others about it and I have prayed about it a lot. Yes I know if I have prayed about it, I have to let go of the worrying and let God deal with it on His timing. Yes I am well aware that the next step is just to do what is logical and go forward. While doing that action is logical and easy to say, the practice of it never gets any easier with time.
 - ii) So what does that have to do with the topic at hand? Part of my issue is the fear of saying the wrong thing. What I constantly have to learn the hard way is to let go of my fears of saying the wrong thing, and just trust God to guide what we say.
 - iii) The related idea is we can't fix other people. When we are around a group or just someone who is talking about someone else, it takes guts to say, "you should not say that". I find the easier and better thing to do is just to walk away. The other person can't have the satisfaction of spreading some gossip simply if we refuse to participate in that action.
- d) Coming back to the verse, the point is first to realize the danger of saying the wrong thing can cause a lot of damage to others. The second thing is to realize the only way that we can have victory over our tongue is by using God's power to help us.
- i) To state the obvious here, James is using the tongue as a metaphor for blurting out what we are thinking. It is not tongue as a physical organ that is the issue, but the desire to share information that should not be shared in the first place.
 - ii) Remember the main purpose of James' letter is to say in effect that if we do believe that Jesus is God, we should do something about it. The reason James is going on and on about the tongue is if we are sharing our faith with others, then it matters a lot what we do and don't say to others. James is saying think about what we are saying as it affects how others judge us and our witness to others about Jesus.
 - iii) Does that mean we should just keep our mouths shut as what we say could hurt other people? I wish it was that easy. The truth comes back to the idea that we have to trust God to guide us in what we say to others in all aspects of our lives. That does not mean we have to pray before every time we speak. It just means that we think about God enough through prayer time and mediation upon His word that it affects our speech as well as our actions.
 - iv) With that bit of encouragement stated, it is time to move on.
7. Verse 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.
- a) One of the amazing things to consider is all of the creatures other than humans that have been tamed or controlled by the desires of humans. There are zoos and aquariums that exist around the world that hold just about any creature one can think of. Even back in James' time, the point is he realized that people are in effect greater than all of the animals because we can find a way to life in safety from attacks from such creatures or even to be able to eat most of those creatures if desired.
 - b) His point is that even though other animals can be controlled by man to some extent, the tongue is in effect far more powerful as it can do far more damage. As I said in the start of this lesson, more the spreading of rumors than does damage even by murder, or in this case, the danger done by people being hurt by say wild animals. This leads well into the next verse. Speaking of which:

8. Verse 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.
- a) James' point here is effectively we can use our tongues for both good and bad things. We think and say things that please God and we also think and say things that curses others.
 - b) Many times in the past I have defined the word "holy". For the sake of my newer readers, the essential idea is about separating something for God's purposes. Think of owning say a dinner plate that is only to be used by one person. One is dedicating that place just for the use of that one person. Being holy is simply about dedicating things for God's use.
 - i) The point as it relates to these verses is that whether we realize it or not, when we speak in ways that praise God, we in effect make our tongues holy. We may not think of it in those terms, but effectively that is what we are doing. It is like taking that special dinner plate that we reserve for a special person, and then letting the family dog or cat lick off it. We are ruining what is holy when we use the same mouths that praise God in order to curse other people.
 - c) I can just hear a lot of you saying, so what? We have good days when we use our tongue to praise God and praise other people and we have bad moments when we utter words that put down people. That makes us human, so what? The point is God is saying to us, that if something belongs to Him, then He cares what we say. If God owns that special dinner plate, then He doesn't want to have say, a dog lick out of it as well. The point is if we use our mouths to praise God, He doesn't want that same mouth associated with the act of cursing others.
 - i) If for no other reason, we should be careful what we say as to be a good witness for Jesus in our lives. Let's face it, people won't think very much of us when we are busy insulting them or spreading rumors about them. The point is to learn to see people as needing Jesus in their lives not someone to be put down.
 - ii) Let me take the classic example of driving a car and someone just cuts off us. The natural thing to do is to yell at them for cutting us off. That's a simple example of using the same tongue for cursing that we use for praising God. I speculate what James would recommend here is instead of cursing them, pray for them. I have to admit that one of my favorite bad habits when someone cuts me off is to wave at them as to show that I saw what they did. I suppose it is better than cursing them out for what they did, but it is still not as desirable as saying praying for them.
 - iii) Let me use a more extreme example. Suppose someone really hurts us in some way. Isn't it natural to want to yell at them for what they did? Of course it is. If anything, that is what others will expect us to do. However, if we treat someone nicely after they have done something wrong to us, people will eventually think, how do I develop such a wonderful attitude that that I can be positive when I too hurt others who have done wrong to me in my life?
 - a) Does that mean we can't correct people who have hurt us? The key is to do it in a loving and gentle way and not curse them out. That too is what to be learned from James' point about how we use our tongues.
 - d) What all this comes down to is about being a good witness for God. If we as Christians have been separated from the world in order to spend eternity with Him and to use our time in this world to make a difference for Him. Let's be honest, we are not making that difference when we are putting down other people. That is why James is saying to take what is dedicated to God, our tongues (and our whole lives for that matter) and not use what has become separated for His use in order to cause potential harm to other people.
 - i) Jesus once said that the way people will know we are believes is by the fact that we show love to one another. (See John 13:35.) Let's be honest we are not showing that love to others when we are saying negative things about them or to them.

9. Verse 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.
- a) Just in case it hasn't sunk in yet that we should not use our tongues for both good things like praising God and bad things like spreading rumors or cursing out other people, we have James uses two illustrations here in order to make that point clear.
- i) James first illustration is that a source of water is either fresh water or salt water. In the land of Israel there is the Sea of Galilee, which was fresh water and the Dead Sea, which is salt water. Remember that this letter was originally written to Jewish believers and they would understand that illustration.
- ii) Just in case that intended audience would not get that illustration, James throws in one more to consider. It is the idea that a tree can only bear one kind of fruit. Let's face it, we can't get figs from grapevines or grapes from a fig tree.
- b) James is not making these points in order to teach say children about how water sources do work or how trees bears fruit. His point is to say that since each water source is only associated with either fresh or salt water, and how each fruit bearing tree only grows one type of fruit so our tongues should only be associated with either praises or curses.
- i) Earlier I asked the "so what" question. I said that sometimes we use our mouths in order to say good things and sometimes we use it to say bad things. The "so what" is that because people associate us Christians with trusting in God, therefore how we act should follow what we believe all the time. That's the hardest part of living the Christian life: The "all the time" part.
- ii) James is saying in effect whether we realize it or not, we have to always be a good witness for Jesus. If our lives belong to Him, then in effect we are always to be a good witness for Him. That means to use our tongues only for praise and not for the purpose of cursing out other people.
- iii) But that is impossible we might say. We all have our bad days. Do you expect us to be perfect? No. However, as I have been preaching through this lesson, I desire that each us rely upon His power in order to say speak positively and use what we say in order to make a difference for Him and not our own willpower. One of the things I've been beating to death in recent lessons is the idea that we can't live the Christian life based on willpower. It is only based on His power that we can and do have the ability to be a good witness for Him. Hopefully, that idea has sunk in by now how each of us should live.
- c) Let me come back to how to do this practically. Let's be honest, we can't pray before we utter every thought that comes into our heads. It is also not realistic to request that we pray before everything we say. So how do we control our tongues? First, it is matter of telling God that what we say is in effect His problem and not ours. It is about telling God that our mouths do belong to Him and we need His power in order to control the things that come out of our mouths. I'm not saying recite these exact words, and then magically we will never say anything bad again. I am saying and I have seen this come true in my own life that when I do dedicate something of mine to Him, such as the way I talk over time "all by itself" things do get better.
- i) Does that mean I am perfect? Of course not. However, when I do catch myself, I also realize it is time for a quick silent prayer to remind myself that what I do say is in effect His business as my tongue as well as my life belongs to Him. That is why James is saying to take what is holy, which includes our mouths as well as our lives and use them in ways that are glorying to Him.
- ii) That seems very difficult if not impossible. You are absolutely right. That is why the only way to change is based on His power, and not our willpower. That is also why I have seen my life change in so many ways once we do give to Him what is ours. Think of it this way: What do we have to lose by trying except a bad habit?

10. Verse 13: Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.
- a) Remember that one of James' main themes of this whole letter is in effect, "Put your time and your money where your mouth is". James is not saying that we don't live by faith. James is saying that if we do live by faith, our deeds should naturally follow that faith.
 - b) That thought leads perfectly to this verse. James wants us humbly to do good deeds in order to make a difference for God. Here is the key point: "From wisdom". That comes back to the idea of not doing good deeds based on willpower. It is based on the concept that we have to regularly and constantly realize that God is our power source in order to do those good deeds in the first place. That is the type of wisdom that God gives us.
 - c) Back in Chapter 1 of this letter James tells us that if any of us lack wisdom, we are to ask Him for wisdom and He generously gives it to us without finding fault in us or asking us to clean up our sins first. (Chapter 1, Verse 5). The point is if we don't have the wisdom or let's say the ability to speak in a way that James desires, we can and should seek God for the wisdom and the ability to change to be the type of person He wants us to be.
 - i) The point as it relates to this section of the letter is we don't have the ability on our own to be a good person all the time and be nice to everyone we meet. We need to pray about it and ask God to give us that power to be the type of witness for Him that He wants us to be. I believe I've beaten that point into our heads by now. I figure that is enough conviction for this verse, so now we can move on.
11. Verse 14: But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. ¹⁵ Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. ¹⁶ For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.
- a) In effect, James is still discussing how we talk. However, he now wants to get to the root of the problem, which is what we think. Let's face it, what we think is the basis for what comes out of our mouths and James is well aware of that fact.
 - i) With that obvious statement made, he now focuses on two specific issues in these verses. The first is envy and the second is selfish ambition. It is probably best if I discuss those ideas in order to understand what God desires of us about them.
 - b) Let's start with envy. This is about desiring what we don't have. In effect is it about one of the 10 Commandments that condemns desiring things that we don't own. (See Exodus 20:17 for that commandment.) First let me separate ambition from envy. God does not condemn the idea of working hard in order to say, provide for oneself or for one's family. There is nothing wrong with ambition in order to be successful in life. Envy is when we think or say, "I want what you have, and I'm going to steal it from you, or I am going to put you down because you have that and I want that."
 - i) Of all the sins one can imagine, why would God condemn envy so much? It is the only one of the 10 Commandment that focuses on what we think and not what we actually do. Yes we can all see how envy is wrong, but why is it such a big issue that it is one of those commandments? It comes back to the concept that if we do believe God exists and He is in charge of all aspects of our lives, then all we have belongs to Him includes our thoughts. God is well aware of the fact that the bad things we say begin with bad thoughts. That is why the commandment implies the idea of, "give your thoughts to God, so that way one's actions will follow".
 - ii) So does that mean I have to pray my way through every thought? That would be impossible and that is not what I, nor the bible is asking. However, Paul does say to give every thought to God in 2nd Corinthians 10:5. That means every time we get a bad thought instead of acting on that thought and lashing out at someone, God desires we give that thought to Him. In the times I have remembered to do that it is amazing how much better I have reacted to potentially horrible situations.

- c) This lead to James second issue, which is selfish ambition. As I stated earlier, this is not about the desire for a better life and working hard for that better life. This is about using the most valuable thing God give us, our time ultimately for His glory. There is nothing wrong with say getting a job or starting a business if we believe that is His will for our life for that moment. The idea is more about doing things or desiring things that over time don't bring glory to Him. Does that mean for example, I can't eat a desert, or say relax at home when I am tired? Of course not. It is about the bigger picture of using our lives in order to bring glory to Him and not to us.
 - i) Let me give an example or two. An example of a selfish ambition might involve stealing something in order enrich our lives. A selfish ambition might be to make the mental decision to ignore God in order to say, work more hours in the week. That doesn't mean during times of emergencies that we can't focus on other things. It just means that God wants to be a part of every aspect of our lives. As one of my favorite bible teachers says, "Time to go shopping? Great, take God with you."
 - d) All of this discussion does lead us back to these verses. The key point here is that when we make the effort or think the thoughts that we instinctively know are not pleasing to God, we have to realize the danger of those thoughts and actions. We have to realize that those things either come from our own selfish desires or are demonic in origin. The key point is not where such thoughts and actions come from, but to realize that when we do think and say things that are not pleasing to God, it can only harm our lives and do harm to other people around us. It comes back to the concept that He wants us to use our lives in order to make a difference for Him in all that we do.
 - e) James ends this section by reminding us, do you want to find the root cause of what is causing us to be a bad witness for Jesus? Think about what we do focus upon when we say things that are not pleasing to Him. That is why Paul urges us in Second Corinthians to give Him our bad thoughts. It is God effectively saying to us, "I am bigger than you. I can deal with this situation in a much better way than we could ever do. Let me take care of this My way." If we can learn to think that way, I promise that as an example, we will swear at a lot less drivers on the road let alone be a better witness for Him.
12. Verse 17: But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸ Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.
- a) At this point, James comes back to the question of, if we ask God for wisdom, if we ask God for wisdom, how do we know that we are getting that wisdom? God does not speak to us out loud. How do we know if the thoughts that come into our head are from God or not? How do we recognize His wisdom? Great questions and hopefully these two verses give us an answer to that question.
 - b) Let's start with the word "pure" in Verse 17. When I think of something pure, I picture a food or drink that is not mixed with anything else or not watered down. The idea here is that one way we can tell if an idea is from God or not, is based on what that idea entails.
 - c) If we think about what we believe God wants us to do, we realize that the motivation for doing that does bring glory to Him. Whatever it is we may be called to do is not sinful in anyway. Often the decisions we are called to make may even be painful in the short term with the desire to make things better.
 - i) The classical example is the surgeon applying the knife to our bodies. While that surgeon cuts one open, the idea is to remove or fix the problem to make us better. My only point here is that sometimes the right decision may even be painful, but we know it is pure if the intention to do the right thing is not sinful and does bring about glory to God through the decisions that we believe He is leading us to make.
 - ii) I believe that if one is seeking God and desiring to do His will, usually the type of decisions we make are His will, and we don't need a visual sign for confirmation.

- d) Anyway, back to James. The first point he makes here is that the way we know that we are receiving God's wisdom is not necessarily by any sort of big sign in the sky stating it is His will for us to go "this way". The way we can tell that the decisions we make are from God is first of all, that decision is pure in the sense it does not involve any sin or ill will.
- i) Since I've beaten that point pretty strongly, the next point is peace loving. Let's be honest if the wisdom needed involves some sort of conflict with others, we can tell that a potential solution is from God is that if it leads to peace. Does that mean that He is never in favor of battles or war? That would contradict a lot of battles listed in the bible including the ones that are God ordained.
 - ii) Let me answer that question this way: What good have wars accomplished? Well, it brought an end to slavery in the United States. It ended many dictatorships and ended oppression of one group over another. My whole point here is the idea that all decisions of "peace loving" is not the same as pacifism. Are all wars essentially horrible things that should be a last resort? Of course. Anyone who has a military background will tell you that war is always to be avoided and a last resort.
 - iii) My point is simply that an indication that wisdom that comes from God is that the result should be to have peace among believers. We can't make a difference in our lives for Him if we are busy fighting each other. That is another way we can tell if the decision we have to make is God based if the ultimate results is peace making.
- e) Next we have the word "considerate". A way to tell if our decisions that we make are God based is if the results of our decisions are considerate of others. Jesus taught that the most important biblical commands are essentially to love God and others. (Based on Matthew Chapter 22: 27-29.) If our decisions put the interest of others before our own interests that would naturally follow that the decisions we make are based on His wisdom.
- f) Next is submissive. One can see how that follows "considerate". This comes back to the idea of putting the needs of others as priority over our own needs. That is the definition of the word "submissive". It is not only about submitting our lives to God but also to put the needs of others over our own needs. So I can never do anything for myself and only be helpful to others? If that is true, I suppose our bills would never get paid, and maybe the laundry would never get done. If we care about others then we should put the needs of others around us first. Then I promise God and others understand that we also have to take care of our needs. The time to take care of our needs does come around.
- g) Then we have the topic of "full of mercy". One of the hardest things to do in life is to be able to forgive someone who has really hurt us. I've discussed this in the last lesson. The key point is that to not forgive someone means we are holding on to that pain inside of us. We continue to let people hurt us by not letting go of our anger at them. Obviously that is a separate issue from seeing people punished for crimes. Just as God forgives us, we have to forgive others. That is why the bible in general and James specifically here teaches that we are to have mercy on others, especially those who have hurt us in some way. To state the obvious again, if someone is physically hurting us, we need to get away from them.
- h) The final two ways to know if the decisions we make are from God is if they are impartial and sincere. Remember again why I am going through this verse term, by term. Back in Chapter 1, Verse 5, James said that God gives us the wisdom to make the right decisions. Since God does not speak to us out loud and rarely gives us visual signs, there needs to be a way to recognize if the decisions we make are God based. Thus, James creates this list of ways that we can recognize if the decisions we make are based on His Wisdom.
- i) That is why the last two terms used here are "impartial and sincere". Those terms are logical after going through the other ones listed in these verses. It would make sense that wisdom is impartial and sincere when making decisions that give us the wisdom we need in order to be a good witness for God in all that we do. The idea of sincere simply means that there is no deceit involved in that wisdom.

- i) If the goal here is to live a life based on learning and applying God's wisdom to our lives, another logical question is, what is the result of that wisdom? That is what Verse 18 tries to answer. Notice that James calls those who seek after God's wisdom to be peacemakers.
 - i) If that term is familiar, it should, as it is the same term Jesus used in the "Sermon on the Mount" (a three chapter speech by Jesus in Matthew Chapters 5-7). Again, the idea of being a peacemaker is not about being a pacifist. It is the idea that we as Christians seek to have peace in our relationship with God and seek peace in our relationship with other people. If we desire to be a good witness for God, then it should be the goal as much as possible to have peace with others around us.
 - ii) Does that include the people we cant stand? Of course. It is about not wishing bad will on anyone. Again it is about seeing people as needing God in their lives and needing His forgiveness just as He has forgiven us. Are there people in this world that I'm not crazy about? Of course. However, I do wish peace upon them and still try to be a good witness to them when I come in contact with them.
 - iii) The idea is that we rely upon His strength and power in order to have that type of peace with others but also rely upon His power to make that difference for Him in all that we do. Remember the goal of the Christian life: To use the most valuable thing God gives us, our time and our resources in order to make that difference for Him in this world. I went through these verses term by term in order to show all of us how to tell when we are actually applying God's wisdom to our lives.
 - a) The easy part is to read this and think, "OK, good basic advice". The trick of course is to learn to think in terms of desiring His will and letting Him be in charge of our lives. Then we are making that difference for Him.
 - iv) On that positive note, it would be a good time to end this lesson in prayer.
13. Heavenly Father, help us to realize that it is impossible to live the type of life that is pleasing to You without relying upon Your power in order to live that life in the first place. May we trust in Your power and strength to use the most valuable thing You give us, our time so that we can use that to make that difference for You. Help us to remember that our words and even our thoughts were designed to bring glory to You. Help us to keep that relationship with You in focus in our dealings with other people. Help us to recognize Your wisdom as we apply it to our lives so that we can make that difference for You. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.