

# THEOLOGY FROM SCRATCH— WEEK 10



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.*

Week 10 gets into specifics. Beware the power of the tongue, especially if you use it to teach. While wisdom is obviously good, our sinful pride makes it dangerous. We chase after things that do not satisfy.

The key is to just relax and draw close to God.

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Theology From Scratch — Week 10

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## Dialogue 46 — Teachers

*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. — James 3:1–5a (NKJV)*

James just finished busting on faith without works. Now he's going after speech, especially for teachers. Why is that so important?

It's important because there is great power in speech. 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. They're hopelessly stuck in a state of almost total ignorance.

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

In a way, all speech is teaching.

Unless you're lying. That's part of James's point. 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. Notice the connection with what I said about partiality. Sin that impacts other people can spawn other sin. Speech has that kind of power.

Notice that James's examples of partiality all involved speech.

*For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, "You sit here in a good place," and say to the poor man, "You stand there," or, "Sit here at my footstool," have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? — James 2:2–4 (NKJV)*

Of course, the power of the tongue can be literally amplified by a microphone, but that's nothing compared to the power of the printing press.

And now that's multiplied again by the power of the internet. I don't even know how many people are "listening in" to this dialogue. And that number can grow without limit in the future.

So, since this is teaching right here, are you worried about it?

Absolutely! No one elected me to have this kind of power over others. Granted it's all voluntary; no one is forced to read this.

Still, it gives me the creeps to think that people may act on my recommendations. I never stop thinking about this very warning in James. I depend on editors and other mentors to keep my writings from going totally off the rails. I'd be lost without them.

The same holds for teachers—although professional teachers have at least been through some kind of certification before they are given power over students. Still, the fact that they give out grades makes that power explicit.

The tongue gives any teacher the power to alter the course of a student's life.

They almost can't avoid that.

And mass communication gives any speaker or writer great power over an almost unlimited audience. A writer can change the course of history.

The pen truly is mightier than the sword.

Right. This is a fair point by James—and not just for Christians.

Hadn't thought about that.

James is going to kick this up a notch tomorrow.

See you then.

## Dialogue 47 — Tongue Troubles

*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. — James 3:5b–12 (NKJV)*

I don't even understand what James is talking about here. He makes it sound like speech is our enemy. Didn't you just say that it's a great gift?

Yes, it is a great gift (so is nuclear power), but great power enables great evil. Our sinful nature can do great things with great power—greatly evil things.

This passage is the perfect follow-on for yesterday's one. Given the power of speech, what should we expect people to do with it? 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 Edward R. Tufte, the author of the legendary work, *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*.

*"Power corrupts; PowerPoint corrupts absolutely."*

Ha. That might even be literally true; anything that enhances speech enhances its potential to do harm. You can lie more effectively with charts and graphics.

Are you familiar with the book *How to Lie with Statistics* by Darrell Huff?

Sure. It's a classic.

Then you know that Huff wrote it to help people know when they're being conned. He concluded the introduction with this gem, "The crooks already know these tricks; honest men must learn them in self-defense."

All these truisms are examples of how power enables both good and evil. In fact, Lord Acton's quote about power corrupting isn't exactly true. Power doesn't actually corrupt; it just makes corruption manifest. The corruption (sin) was always there.

You keep mentioning this thing called "sin", but I haven't really called you out on it. It seems like you're assuming that everyone is evil—that there are no good guys.

Yes, and I think all these quotes reflect that.

Time out. Why can't it be true that power corrupts people who aren't corrupt to begin with? Why can't there be some people who don't lie with statistics?

Sure, there are people who tell the truth with statistics. Not everyone is bad all the time; that's not what my (and James's) assumption is. It's that we all have an evil core.

I think the best example of that can be seen in the structure of the US Constitution. The founding fathers believed in this Christian doctrine and so built checks and balances into our system of government.

Rather than try to limit power to only people who could handle it, they limited power period. They separated power into the three branches of government and gave each branch the power to hold the other branches accountable.

And this has worked beautifully. Our constitution is the longest surviving constitution in history.

Okay, connect that back to this passage.

The high point is, "*My brethren, these things ought not to be so.*"

James is referring to how with 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.

Why is that so important?

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 isn't legit if we curse men with the same tongue. If our speech is inconsistent, then the things we say aren't reliable. Even our confession of faith becomes suspect.

I can see why James wouldn't be happy with that.

So, this is all part of James's overall theme that our behavior matters. Bad behavior is concerning as an indicator, but it can also bear bad fruit.

James will give us another example of how our sin wrecks things tomorrow.

See you then.

## Dialogue 48 — Meek Wisdom

*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 3:13–18 (NKJV)*

Wisdom needs to be meek? Isn't this just an argument against being pedantic?

No, I think it's much stronger than that. James uses two Greek words, “wise” (σοφός, sah-phahs) and “understanding” (ἐπιστήμων, e-pis-tay-moan) 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 a lot of different kinds of smarts and a lot 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 everyone else.

Absolutely.

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.

Maybe. 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.

This reminds me of Henry Kissinger's famous statement:

*"Academic politics are so vicious precisely because the stakes are so small."*

Kissinger was actually 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 incredibly annoying. Fortunately, it's not universal. In my experience, the most illustrious professors (especially physics professors) don't seem to have a chip on their shoulder.

And the seminary professors I've known seem to be especially immune. They're almost universally *peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits*.

Good professors seem to love their students instead of themselves.

Yeah, I've known some folks without that emotional baggage, too.

Hmmm. That's an interesting take on this. James doesn't describe this in terms of emotional baggage, but in terms of "*bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts.*"

I think this shows two sides of the same coin, and that coin is pride. Emotional baggage is more about wounded pride, while *self-seeking* is more general.

*Bitter envy* is definitely pride too.

Right. As I've already noted, pride is at the heart of sin, and partiality is all about pride. Plus, James explicitly said, "*do not boast,*" so the connection to pride is obvious.

This is the key to understanding this passage. Wisdom obviously has the potential to feed pride, and James is warning us to avoid that.

And, boy, is his warning stern.

*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.*

Frankly, that's his writing style for just about everything.

Yes, he was highly motivated to write this letter. I think that's justified. I'd be highly motivated too.

And there is the larger point that James must have been troubled because he was seeing a lot of so called "Christians" doing a lot of unimpressive things.

That certainly applies today.

Absolutely. James is going to get even harsher in tomorrow's passage.

## Dialogue 49 — Rat Race

*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."* — James 4:1–6 (NIV)

Wow. This is incredibly harsh. Are James's readers really guilty of all these awful things?

Not everyone is guilty of all of them. This isn't a letter to a person; it's a letter to a church. These behaviors exist.

So, having just explained how our pride 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? The fruit of pride—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 that's not about outward behavior.

*"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 inward sin.

Out of sight, out of mind, right?

Not totally. The quarreling makes it visible. Then James digs down to the root.

*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.*

I don't get this. The first sentence sounds like the health and wealth gospel, but the second sentence heads in the opposite direction.

Yes, yes, yes. James is trying to teach his audience the correct Christian mindset. They've embraced Christianity, but they're still stuck in the old way of thinking about life.

The whole Christian mindset can be summarized on one word—relax. We need to quit the rat race and let God run His universe. Life is not a competition.

Yeah, everyone acts like life is a competition.

I guess you know that the term “rat race” doesn’t have a Christian origin. It was coined by fighter pilots in the 1930’s to describe “follow-the-leader” exercises. It caught on generally because of the well-known use of mazes to train rats.

Right, but it’s a perfect description of the way people chase after status. The Christian angle is that this is rooted in the sin of pride.

The lesson here is simple but subtle. We need to let our relationship with God be what it should be—the relationship between a created being and its creator. Consider this:

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

Definitely Santa Claus.

This isn’t some minor error where we just couch our requests badly. This reflects our misunderstanding of who we are and what our role should be.

And the kicker is that getting this wrong leads to nothing but pain and stress. We’d be a lot better off if we’d just stop trying to shoulder the load of being God. That’s not our job. That’s the point of,

*“God opposes the proud  
but shows favor to the humble.”*

So, you’re saying that God won’t honor self-centered prayer requests?

No, James is saying it.

*When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.*

Seems kind of harsh. Why would God do that?

Not as harsh as almost everything else James has said. If God can clue us into our mistaken attitudes and thus mature us into fully functioning Christians, it’s well worth a little disappointment.

So, this isn’t about getting into heaven; it’s just about Christian maturity, right?

You bet. As with many of the previous passages, this is not a challenge to sola fide. Tomorrow’s passage wraps this up nicely.

## Dialogue 50 — Practical Advice

*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. — James 4:7–10 (NKJV)*

I was wondering when James would move into application.

Yes, now James turns to the practical details. “*Therefore*” these 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 under someone’s authority. It’s a long-term commitment.

And the Greek word translated as resist (ἀντίστημι, an-thi-stay-me) is also not just in the moment. It literally means “set oneself against.” This is long term, too.

So, the two sentences of verse four get us back to basic long-term lordship. Being one-hundred percent committed to Jesus as lord of your life drives the enemy away.

Isn’t this what the book of James has been about all along?

Exactly, and now he’s getting down to the nuts and bolts. The next three verses assume the first one. This is practical advice for 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.

So, you’re not supposed to have fun?

No, that’s not what it means, though I can see why folks might think that. God created a world full of fun things. The things that are a problem are a tiny fraction of the whole.

“Worldly pleasures” was my term, not James’s. I mean those things that are unhealthy or sinful. That’s the traditional meaning of terms like “things of this world.” This colloquial system is based on the view that the devil is the “prince” of this world. We get that from passages like Matthew 4:8–9.

*Again, the devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him, “All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me.” (NKJV)*

Interesting, since you guys believe God has ultimate power and authority.

Yes, the devil is merely a pretender. It's just a colloquialism anyway. It's designed to draw a contrast between the things that glorify God and those that don't.

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 (NKJV)

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

Worldly pleasures are worse than just a distraction from God; they are often unhealthy.

Yeah. Some kinds of partying cause a lot of problems.

This is by design—the devil's design. He tempts us with things which, if we would just take a broader look at them, wouldn't be tempting at all.

And James shows the ultimate results. *Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.*

It still looks like James is saying that Christians shouldn't be happy.

No, he's specifically calling out the double-minded—the "Christians" who haven't yet given up being party animals. They're the ones who won't (and shouldn't) be happy.

This is a consistent message in James. These double-minded Christians need to grow up.

And, the reward for doing so is great. *Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.*

What does "lift you up" mean?

It's just a colloquialism for benefit. The ESV translates the Greek word ὑψώσει (hoops-oh-say) as exalt.

Like how "down" means depressed?

Yeah, or how "elevate" means improve or make important.

James will extend this into not judging others tomorrow.

See you then.