

## JAMES 3:2-5a

### A PERFECT CHRISTIAN

“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. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. 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. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.”<sup>1</sup>

**T**he story is told of a pastor who was trying to make the point that no one is perfect. Declaiming from the pulpit, he asked, “Do any of you know a perfect man?” Expecting to rush on to the anticipated negative answer, he was startled to hear a meek little voice speak up, “I do!” Looking out over the congregation, he finally espied a timid-looking little man seated far back in the auditorium.

“Excuse me,” stated the preacher as he fixed the little man with his gaze, “you say you know someone who is perfect?”

“Yes,” said the mousy little man, “my wife’s first husband.”

The story is funny, but it does compel us to acknowledge a truth that is common knowledge—there is not, nor has there ever been, a perfect person in the entire world. James seems to hold out the possibility that there could possibly be a perfect individual lurking somewhere in our world. However, James is not referring to an individual who never sins. Rather, in these verses, James is speaking of a spiritually mature person. Though there is no possibility of being sinless, there is every expectation that the Christian will become mature in faith and practise. James is seeking to build up the people to whom he is writing, enabling them to become mature in spiritual insight and ultimately in their conduct in the world.

**MATURITY, NOT SINLESS PERFECTION, IS UNDER SCRUTINY** — “We all stumble in many ways.” James is addressing Christians who are persecuted because they are Christians. When James wrote, these saints were experiencing hardship because of their beliefs. We have seen repeated instances in the preceding chapters of the trials they were compelled to endure: loss of wealth, loss of friendships, and loss of the social networks they had long taken for granted.

The author of the Letter to Hebrew Christians speaks pointedly of some of the trials early saints endured, perhaps describing the very Christians to whom James was writing. “Some were tortured, refusing to accept release... Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth” **[HEBREWS 11:35-38]**.

Under such fierce testing, many persecuted believers grew discouraged and their faith gave way to fear. Seemingly bereft of wisdom, they were tempted to deny their Faith for momentary relief. Angered and frustrated, these suffering saints frequently turned to their own ingenuity in order to survive. Some believers began to adulate wealth and power, rather than supporting one another, and many reduced worship to ritual. They reacted just as we do.

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Studying the second chapter, we witnessed James' emphasis upon practical Christianity. Rather than performing rituals in a mindless fashion, Christians are to show compassion and reign over any biases that might otherwise prevail within the congregation, according to James. In other words, James sought to encourage these persecuted believers to live holy lives. Arriving at the present chapter, James addressed yet another serious failing among the people of God.

People that were not recognised as people of power or wealth within the world were tempted to exalt themselves within the congregation through advancing their own agenda. Teachers were esteemed within Jewish culture, and so some of the saints thought to elevate their own standing within the Christian community through taking control of the congregation by presenting themselves as teachers. So, James cautioned his readers against promoting themselves, waiting instead on the Lord to do whatever promotion was to be conferred. His admonition is profitable for believers in this day, just as it was for those early Christians.

Perhaps you do not think there was a serious problem when James wrote, but from a spiritual point of view, there were serious problems evident among the churches. Wealth and power and stature in the eyes of the world are not necessarily indicative of spiritual maturity. The story is told of a time when Thomas Aquinas was walking with a prelate through one of the great cathedrals. Referring to a coffer filled with moneys, the prelate remarked, "Behold, Master Thomas, the church can no longer say, as did Saint Peter, 'Silver and gold have I none!'" Thomas was apparently quick with his retort, "Alas, neither can we say what follows, 'In the Name of Jesus Christ, rise up and walk.'" Focused, even in a small measure, on gaining approval from this dying world, the people of God were sacrificing spiritual power and maturity.

Something similar happens to the people of God in this day. Far too many of the churches of our Lord resemble the rivers of west Texas when they are at flood stage—they are half a mile wide and ankle deep. While there are many people present, there is no evidence of spiritual power or godly maturity. Where there is maturity, there is power. Where there is immaturity, though there may be great zeal, there can be no power. Nothing that is done among these bastions of immaturity will remain for long. And that was the concern James had for the work of God among the churches to which he wrote. He sought to build the saints so that they would become mature and so that the cause of Christ would advance and so that the Name of the Master would be glorified.

Casting my eye across the landscape of the contemporary churches, I grieve to observe a dearth of maturity among God's professed people. Even among those who present themselves as leaders, there is too often a decided lack of spiritual maturity. Though I dare not profess to be able to speak for the whole of Christendom, nor even for North American evangelicals in general, I have nevertheless invested nearly thirty years of my life among the people of God in British Columbia; and these long years provide perspective for western Canada.

My ministry in this province has been primarily among smaller churches, as I especially focused on restarting stagnant congregations, or on planting churches where there were none. I can say with confidence that it is easier to give birth than it is to raise the dead. For all the difficulties of initiating a congregation—and the difficulties are many—the difficulties of creating a vibrant, growing congregation out of a senescent assembly is infinitely more difficult.

Congregations pass through stages, just as do individuals. The vibrancy of youth marks the first steps of a congregation. There is a sense of expectation and anticipation as young churches anticipate what God will do through them. They look to the future with optimism and await the power of God. Early in the life of a congregation, people are willing to invest time and energies in order to accomplish the work God has assigned.

As time passes, these nascent churches age and within the membership there is a growing realisation that work will be required for a long time. The work will be demanding; and just as there is no discharge from war, so there is no respite from the demands to labour in the harvest fields. New congregations fight discriminatory social perceptions, and because the demands will be constant, the casual attendee will grow weary and jaded, and there will be repeated failures of Christians to invest their lives fully in the work that is required. The average Christian has been trained to receive rather than to give, and so this average Christian looks for a place that will minister to her own perceived needs rather than seeking a place where she can minister.

At last, a day arrives when the congregation realises that it has aged. In desperation the members try to recapture the vibrancy that marked them when they were new. “We need youth,” the elderly members cry. “Make the worship lively! Hire a youth pastor! Reach the children!” Multiplied ideas flow, each demonstrating the anxiety arising from the realisation that the congregation has grown senescent. The desperate congregation focuses on methods rather than looking at their own hearts. They are more concerned to find a quick fix that will bring a crowd than they are with asking how they may again have the presence of the Living God. At this stage, it is almost impossible to move the aged congregation toward a vibrant walk with the Lord. They are suffering from hardening of the attitudes, and death is but a breath away.

As an aside of greatest significance, religious senescence is unrelated to the age of the congregation. Religious senescence describes a condition of the heart in which the membership has grown careless about their walk with the Lord and casual about honouring God with their lives. It speaks of a people that have come to depend upon their long identification as Christians rather than maintaining a lively relationship to the Risen Son of God. Whenever a congregation begins to look for something to make the service lively, it is a tacit admission of religious senescence. For where the Living God is at work, there will be an evident vibrancy. Where God is, there is excitement and an expectation of momentary demonstration of His power.

The senescent church must be encouraged to recall the former days when, after they were enlightened, they endured a hard struggle with sufferings [see **HEBREWS 10:32**]. Such a congregation needs to remember from where they have fallen, so that they may repent and do the works they did at first [see **REVELATION 2:5**]. The great danger for such a congregation is that if they refuse to do this, then the Master of the church will come to them and remove their lampstand from its place.

Perhaps you imagine that the greatest difficulty facing a preacher is motivating jaded individuals to recapture the joy of the Gospel, or to inspire senescent Christians to do what they did at the first. However, it is my opinion that the greatest difficulty to be overcome is to remove the power structure that strangles Christian vitality and maintains the inertia that keeps the church from seeing where Christ is working. There is a reason small churches are small, and usually the reason has to do with individuals whose hearts have grown small with time. Lacking vision for the greater good of the assembly, these self-appointed power brokers have determined that they must not allow anything or anyone to threaten control over the congregation. Consequently, they are almost always convinced that because they have been members of the assembly for such a long time they are mature Christians.

Though enjoying a reputation of being alive, such people are dead. When pressed to give an answer for the faith that lies within them, they resort to platitudes and the trite apologia, “We’ve never done it that way.” They appeal to personal comfort to justify their positions and demand allegiance to their personal agendas from every member. It is a truism that it does not matter how long you have been on the journey, what matters is how far you have come.

I trust that you understand that James is speaking of maturity. We must not imagine that he is speaking of some sinless perfection, for that can only serve to discourage God's people. Though we are to strive for wholeness, and though we are to long for completeness, such will never be possible until we are mature in heart. Writing the Corinthian Christians, Paul longs for them to become mature. At the beginning of that letter, he encourages them by reminding them that "among the mature we do impart wisdom" [1 CORINTHIANS 2:6].

After taking them to task for demonstrating their immaturity through misuse of the gifts imparted by the Spirit, he speaks of love, which should inform the life of mature believers. Paul writes, "Whether there are utterances given by a person consisting of divine revelations he has received, they shall cease; whether languages, they shall stop, whether knowledge, it shall be done away; for we know in a partial, fragmentary, incomplete way, and we utter divine revelations in the same way. But whenever *that which is complete* comes, that which is incomplete and fragmentary will be done away. When I was a child I was accustomed to speak as a child. I used to understand as a child. I was accustomed to reason as a child. When I have become a man and have the status of an adult, I have permanently put away the things of a child" [1 CORINTHIANS 13:8-11, WUEST].<sup>2</sup>

Scope in on Doctor Wuest's statement in **VERSE TEN**: "whenever that which is complete comes, that which is incomplete and fragmentary will be done away." When one has become mature, when one is completed, then what is incomplete and fragmentary will be done away. Mature Christians focus on those things that are vital. Such believers will say with the Apostle, "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" [PHILIPPIANS 3:13, 14]. Then, to ensure that none of us who read those words misunderstand his intention, Paul challenges each Christian, "Let those of us who are mature think this way" [PHILIPPIANS 3:15].

**THE REVELATION OF THE HEART** — "If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body." There is this bit of negative teaching that must be addressed, if we will reject immaturity and seek maturity. There is a tendency for any of us to minimise our sinful attitudes, even though we hold others to a high standard.

We are not angry; we are responding with righteous indignation to provocation. However, we know others who have a real problem with their temper. We would never gossip; we simply communicate information so that others can join us in prayer. Nevertheless, we know others who cannot be trusted with any secrets. Recently, a federal judge declared a mistrial in a case involving pornography because pornographic materials were found on his personal website. His initial response was that he was researching pornography, though he later admitted that the material was his own. Unfortunately, professed Christians can be every bit as duplicitous.

Jesus said, "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" [MATTHEW 12:34]. Refresh your memory of Jesus' words recorded in **MATTHEW 15:18, 19**. The Master taught those who would be disciples, "What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander." The Master expanded this catalogue of sins in Mark's Gospel. "What comes out of a person defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person" [MARK 7:20-23]. Wow! What a list! And every one of them originates within the heart!

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth S. Wuest, **The New Testament: An Expanded Translation** (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1961)

Inventory that dark list: evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. Fifteen sins, all of which originate in the heart. Were they to remain there, it would be terrible enough. Though these sins originate in the heart, they fill the mouth and spill over the lips. I do not suggest that Jesus has exhausted the sins of the heart that contaminate the life of individuals, but James is speaking in a summary fashion when he says that “we all stumble in many ways.” Undoubtedly, he includes all these sins and others that could perhaps be enumerated.

The mouth reveals what we are. At any given moment, our speech provides a snapshot of what we are. On one occasion, Jesus said, “The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil.” Then the Master punctuated this knowledge with the statement to which I previously alluded, “Out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks” [LUKE 6:45]. Speaking in unguarded moments, when we have given no thought to what we should say our true self is revealed through what is said.

The point that must be stressed is that we are what we say. In saying this, I do not mean to imply that we somehow determine our destiny through what we say, but rather that we reveal what we are through what is said. I am not suggesting that we create our own reality through our words, but I am cautioning that our character is demonstrated through our speech.

Focus on a strong warning Paul issued to all Christians in the Ephesian letter. “Sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience” [EPHESIANS 5:3-6].

Notice that the Apostle is directing our attention to three specific sins that are unquestionably wrong—sexual immorality, impurity, greed. Then, in the same breath, he writes, “Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place.” Immediately after this, he returns once more to immorality, impurity and greed. The point that I ask you to observe is that the filthiness, the foolish talk and the crude joking are indicative of a heart that is inclined to sexual immorality, impurity and greed. We do not make ourselves sinful with our words, but our words expose the sin that would otherwise lurk in our hearts.

The Apostle then makes two significant statements based upon this knowledge. First, those who are sexually immoral or impure or greedy have no inheritance in the Kingdom of Christ and of God. They demonstrate through their lives that they are united with this dying world and have no thought for the things of God; they are focused on their own gratification. Second, because they have no vital relationship to the Lord God, His wrath is coming upon them. It is not stretching the point to say that venereal disease, lack of emotional stability, restless spirits, unfulfilled yearnings for acceptance, all flow out of the rejection of God’s standard and are evidence of His wrath presently resting upon the sons of disobedience.

A similar passage is found in Paul’s letter to the church in Colossae. There, Christians are admonished to “Put to death ... what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walk, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practises and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” [COLOSSIANS 3:5-10].

With these words, the Apostle is urging believers to recognise that they are no longer identified with this dying world, and therefore they are to take an assessment of their lives, expressing the new self that is being renewed after the image of the One who gives us our being. In other words, we Christians are responsible to make the conscious determination that our speech reflects who we in fact are. James will remind us that though we make the effort, we have not been perfected yet and therefore we will stumble in what we say.

I must pause for a moment to remind you that he says we stumble. His choice of the word “stumble” is significant. Just because we stumble does not mean that we are defeated or that we should therefore lie down in the muck. Remember that the Psalmist has said,

“The steps of a man are established by the LORD,  
when He delights in his way;  
though he fall, he shall not be cast headlong,  
for the LORD upholds his hand.”

[PSALM 37:23, 24]

A former professorial colleague used to say that though a sheep may fall into the mud, it will never lie down in the mud. There is considerable truth in that. James is not telling us simply to cease resisting evil; rather, he is making an accurate observation that sin is always present with us and we must not give it opportunity to rule over us. Such refusal to surrender to despair marks the mature Christian. The mature Christian, reigning over the tongue, is also able to control the body. That one has addressed the sin within, refusing to permit sin to reign.

Thus, the mature saint demonstrates his maturity through his restrained speech. In this manner, the saint worthy of emulation demonstrates that she has crucified the flesh and that she is walking in the Spirit. The individual whose speech is unrestrained, who expresses the dark inventory of sinful attitudes and speech that Jesus catalogued, is anything but mature, and may even have failed to attain the grace of God that is offered to all who are willing to receive it.

**GUIDING THE LIFE** — “If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. 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. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.” If our speech exposes what we are, then we must know that there is another aspect of our speech that is vital to understand.

While we do not make our own reality with what we say, our words do nevertheless direct the course of our lives. As we saw in an earlier message, James notes that we guide horses and ships with very small instruments. A rider turns the horse with the bit. Likewise, a ship is manoeuvred with the rudder. Today, we might speak of a driver guiding the automobile with the steering wheel, or of an astronaut manoeuvring the space shuttle with the thrusters. The point is that small instruments direct the direction of powerful vehicles, and the tongue guides the life.

A congregation is either made strong through what is spoken by the members of the body as they minister to one another, or a congregation is weakened through what is said. That is obvious when we weigh the preaching of the Word, just as we saw in a previous message. Perhaps it is equally evident when we consider the teaching ministry of the church in settings other than what is delivered from the pulpit. However, I suggest that as each member of the Body conducts the various ministries God has assigned to each of us, we are either building up the Body or we are making the Body weaker.

Remember that the Apostle to the Gentiles was concerned that the ministry of the spiritual gifts entrusted to the members of the Body should build up the congregation, encourage the church, or console the saints in their trials [see **1 CORINTHIANS 14:3**]. This concern is also evident when he writes in Ephesians, “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear” [**EPHESIANS 4:29**]. Each of us must determine that we will consider the impact of our words on the future course of the congregation, and especially on the life of those who overhear what we say.

What would happen if each of us determined that we would think, testing our words before they were spoken in order to ensure that we indeed gave grace to all who hear us speak? If we took seriously responsibility to build one another, our speech would be transformed, and undoubtedly we would witness revival. Assuredly, we would each be taking giant steps toward maturity. My challenge to you is to take inventory of what you plan to say before you speak.

Especially when speaking to fellow Christians, and yet accepting responsibility for anyone who may overhear what we say, we need a test to guide our speech. What follows is a test for our words. *Ask yourself before you speak whether what you plan to say is true.* It is not sufficient to say that you “think” what you are going to say is true; what is important is whether it is true. Christians must be truthful in their speech. Since our Father does not lie, we who are created to bear the image of His dear Son must be careful to reflect our divine parentage.

Then, *ask yourself whether that which you are about to say is necessary.* Not everything that is true needs to be said. After all, “Love covers a multitude of sins” [**1 PETER 4:8**]. Before we ever speak we must determine whether what we are about to say is helpful. We should be clear in our own minds about the beneficial impact of our words.

If the information we seek to convey is true, and if we know that it is also necessary, then *we should also determine that what we are about to say is honourable.* In short, does the information we are about to convey glorify Christ? Does the thing we are determined to say honour the person about whom we are planning to speak? Will our words honour the one receiving what we intend to say? Will we regret what we say immediately after we speak? One week after we speak, will we still feel as strongly as we do now that we should have spoken?

Again, *ask yourself whether your words will strengthen others.* Before you speak, ask yourself whether your words will make the congregation stronger, and whether your words will make the relationship between the brothers and sisters of the Body stronger. Will your words separate brothers? Or will your words make the bond of love stronger between fellow believers?

As vital as the former tests are, I am convinced that this final test of our speech is essential for ministering grace and making the people of God strong in the grace of our Lord. It is, I suppose, a guiding principle in applying each of the former tests for our words. Before we speak, and especially as we speak, *we must ask ourselves if we are speaking the truth in love.* What a powerful statement Paul has written concerning Christian speech! The Apostle wrote, “Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the Head, into Christ, from whom the whole Body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the Body grow so that it builds itself up in love” [**EPHESIANS 4:15, 16**].

Paul is considering the interaction of believers, covenanted together in an assembly. As they serve one another in love, each has this one goal of glorifying Christ the Lord. The believers glorify the Master as they make one another stronger, as they seek unity in the Faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God. They glorify the Master as they refuse to rely on their own wisdom, seeking instead the divine wisdom that God promises to His people when they ask.

So, we have a five-fold test to guide us whenever we speak. Before we say a word, we must ask ourselves: *is it true, is it necessary, is it honourable, will it strengthen*, and *am I speaking in love*. Were we to apply this simple five-fold test, our lives would be transformed and our walk with the Master would be strengthened; worship as a congregation would be changed. Soon, it would be bruited about town that God was indeed among us, for we would have taken control of our lives, reigning in our speech.

It is impossible for any of us to rule over our own hearts, until He who is the rightful Ruler reigns within the heart. Then, as He reigns over our heart, we will need to ensure that we fill the heart with that which glorifies His Name. Paul addresses how we are to fill our minds with that which ennobles and edifies when he writes the Philippian Christians in **PHILIPPIANS 4:4-9**. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, 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. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.”

Filling our mind with that which glorifies the Master empowers us to control our speech. Focusing the mind of what is true what is honourable, what is just, or pure, or lovely, or commendable honours the Master. Seeking out the excellence and all that is worthy of praise enables control over the tongue. Especially focusing on the teaching of the Word, meditating on the teaching of the New Testament and the joys that come from walking with the Master empower us to control the tongue, directing our lives into paths that are pleasing to the Father.

It is impossible to fill the mind with what pleases to the Father until we know the Father. Until He has given us the life that is promised, we cannot possibly rule over our own heart, and the tongue will continue to be a restless evil that destroys. To become a Christian, to receive the life that is promised, we need but receive the reign of Christ Jesus the Lord over our life. The Word of God tells us that He offered His life as a sacrifice for our sin. The Good News of the Faith is that He did not remain in the grave. After three days, Jesus raised from the dead. He walked with His disciples and was seen by many others before He ascended into Heaven.

Now, the Word of God calls all who are willing to obey to confess that Jesus is Master over life, believing fully that God has raised Him from the dead. Those who do this will be saved. “For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” The Lord promises that “everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved” [**ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13**].

Have you believed? Do you have faith in the Risen, Living Son of God? Have you openly identified as belonging to Him? Are you walking with Him? Our prayer is that you will indeed receive this Jesus as Saviour and Lord, even today. And for all who know Him, our call is to seize control over the tongue, taking the first steps toward spiritual maturity to the praise of the Father and for the glory of the Master. Amen.