

# LEAD WEIGHTS

---

Avoiding the Patterns That Sink Relationships | James 3:1-12

## *Remarkable Relationships (Part 3)*

### The Power of Small Things

**[LIVE]** For years, I was mystified by it. How could siblings who once shared the same room, or parents and children who once shared the same spoon, get to the place where they now actually cringe at the thought of seeing one another? Or how could couples who once cuddled up together on my premarital counseling couch wind up years later so hardened or hateful toward one another? Why do so many work partnerships and friendships that, at one time, seemed destined to soar in blue skies, end up crashing into the ground instead? How does this happen?

I've come to see that the answer is complicated. As we've explored these past two weeks, some of it may be because some people lack a vision or experience of a Jesus-like love that would guide and motivate them through the hard passages that every relationship endures. Some of it may have to do with the struggle many of us have with accepting and appreciating the inevitable differences between people. But, more and more, I've come to believe that one of the major reasons the kite of our relationships not only fails to reach the height of the remarkable but plummets below even the level of the regular is because of the way we slip into *communicating* with one another. The string of our self gets wound up and knotted in patterns of speaking (or failing to speak) to one another in ways that are simply childish.

This is what we hear the Apostle James agonizing over in the third chapter of his famous letter. "**The tongue,**" he writes, "**is a small part of the body,**" but it exerts an influence disproportionately larger than its size. **[SLIDE 1]** Words are like a "**bit**" in the mouth of a stallion, able to turn that whole animal on its path. **[SLIDE 2]** It's like a "**rudder**" able to alter the direction of a huge ship **[SLIDE 3]** or a "**spark**" capable of igniting a phenomenal fire.

**[LIVE]** Like these other small things, human speech is wonderful under the guidance of someone who knows how to use the power wisely. But used unwisely, our words can leave people trampled or galloping away. They can run the ship of our relationships onto the rocks. They can ignite a blaze of rage or hurt in someone else that will be very hard to put out.

**[SLIDE 4]** This is why James writes: "**not many of you should presume to be teachers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.**"

**[LIVE]** I don't think James is trying to scare you away from volunteering in Sunday School or attempting to thin the ranks of school teachers. I believe what James IS saying is that -- given the power of words -- we must be both careful and wise before

we presume to instruct other people in the error of their ways. **[SLIDE 5]** Jesus himself said, **“I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter” (Mat 12:36)**. What both Jesus and James are underlining is that **WHAT** we say and **HOW** we say it will come back, for good or for ill.

### **Four Weights on the Kite-String**

**[LIVE]** Nobody beyond the Bible would agree more heartily with that truth, I think, than Dr. John Gottman. Do you know that name? If there was a Hall of Fame for Relationship Experts, John Gottman would have a wing to himself. Gottman is a legend in counseling circles because, in as little as twenty minutes of interviewing a pair of struggling people, he can predict with 90% accuracy whether that relationship will fly or crash. When interviewing people after their relationship crashed, Gottman found that 80% of them said that they gradually lost a sense of closeness, care and respect for one another.<sup>1</sup> This can happen with a marriage, a parent or sibling bond, or even a friendship or work relationship.

But what has obsessed John Gottman is figuring out **WHY**. **[SLIDE 6]** He has spent decades drilling into the dynamics of relationships, trying to discern what happens between people that causes this drift and decline. What he ultimately identified were **four particular ways of using words** that function like lead weights on the kite-string of an interpersonal connection. So, for the sake of all those *other* people you know who have relationship challenges, would you like to know what those ways were?

**[SLIDE 7]** The first damaging way with words that Gottman identified was **CRITICISM**. Now, let's face it; every significant relationship has to involve some conversation between people over issues of performance. *"Gosh, I'm disappointed you didn't get that report done, or I'm frustrated that you didn't take the recycling out, because I thought we agreed that you were going to take care of that for us."* That's communicating an honest complaint. The speaker is sharing an earnest emotion and explains why it's there. The other person has a chance to correct the issue downstream or talk about it further if there was some misunderstanding or mitigating circumstance. Constructive critique like this is crucial to good relationships.

**[SLIDE 8]** But here's how the conversation often goes instead. *"I can't believe you didn't DO that! For somebody who always says how productive they are, you are Mr. Unreliable. How selfish do you have to be?!"* Feel the difference? Do you feel what happens to your spirit when someone makes hyperbolic accusations, calls you names, or assaults your character in this sort of way? That's criticism vs. critique.

**[SLIDE 9]** The second weight people often lay on a relationship are words of **CONTEMPT**. There's the co-worker who says: *"You think you're God's gift to this company, don't you? Why if those idiots upstairs only knew what I know about you, they'd can you."* There's the family-member who says: *"I'm sick and tired of putting up*

*with your excuses. Are you hoping for a T.V. Watching Medal or what?"* **[SLIDE 10]** Contempt is expressed through sneering, sarcasm, or hostile humor. It's even heavier than criticism because underlying it is this fundamental disrespect. **[LIVE]** People will sometimes offer excuses for talking like this: *"Hey, so I went overboard a bit; it's just the way I'm wired,"* or *"She knows I don't really mean it."* But the other person picks up the truth: "You disdain me." And the weight of that contempt is profound.

**[SLIDE 11]** Then there's the third weight – DEFENSIVENESS. Dr. Doug McKinley, to whom I owe some of the most helpful insights in this series, reminds us that many of us live by the sports adage that **"the best offense is a good defense."** Many of us are All-Pro's at this. **[LIVE]** Instead of opening ourselves up to really considering the merits of someone's concern, we go on a defensive *attack*. McKinley describes a conversation where a wife says to her husband: *"It bothers me that you look at pornography."* Her husband responds: *"What? You think I'm some kind of pervert don't you."* The wife counters: *"I'm just telling you that it makes me uncomfortable."* He replies: *"Look, I'm not having affairs with those women. They mean nothing to me. You must be feeling insecure."* She says: *"I just wish you wouldn't look at them anymore."* He leaves the room, saying: *"I can't believe you think I'm a pervert."*<sup>2</sup>

When defensiveness like this gets hung on the line of a relationship, a pair of people lose their ability to resolve differences. **[SLIDE 12]** The defensive person is more concerned with preserving his or her image of themselves than with dealing honestly with the heart or hurt of the other person. They deal with their insecurity by denying, diverting, and going on the attack. The other person soon figures this out and stops bothering to raise anymore the very issues that so need to be dealt with in the relationship to keep the kite from crashing. Does this make sense?

**[LIVE]** When criticism, contempt, and defensiveness become grooved patterns in a relationship, it almost always results in the fourth weight being added to the kite-string. **[SLIDE 13]** John Gottman calls this STONEWALLING – and most of us have lived this or seen this more than we want to admit. Picture a mom who's been trying to address her adolescent daughter's appalling grades and rude manners, but has been using the criticism and contempt far too often. Sally walks through the door after school and mom starts in on her. Sally tries a shaky defense, but then leaves the room in a huff. Soon, she starts coming home later and later. She finds any reason to stay out and when at home avoids conversation whenever possible.

What's mom's response? You know it. This avoidance pattern drives mom insane. She yells. She slams doors. She considers throwing the cat at her daughter but settles on grounding her. Now Sally whirls on her mom and glares silently at her, as if to say: *"It's not even worth wasting my breath to speak."* She buries herself in her phone, homework or room and settles in on the silent treatment. Sally tells herself she's not really punishing her mom. *"That would be lowering myself to mom's level. No, I'm just avoiding the hassle."*

## Getting Grounded

**[LIVE]** Now, tell the truth: Does this scenario seem at all familiar? I imagine it does. These patterns of communication (or non-communication) are being repeated between spouses, siblings, workmates and friends every day. This way of interacting is being played out between the Red Party people and the Blue People, and on a grander scale between different races, cultures and religions. **[SLIDE 14]** All of us “**stumble in many ways**” with our words, writes the Apostle James. “**If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man.**” Have we got any perfect men or women here?

**[LIVE]** Maybe you haven’t thought a lot about the way you are speaking. Most of us don’t dwell too much on our heavy way with words, especially since lots of people talk these ways I’ve been describing. Sure, we lose it every now and then, but we’re much more aware of all the *nice* things we’ve said to people and the fine way we speak and sing of God or other noble things.

**[SLIDE 15]** But this is odd, as James points out. “**With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse [others], who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing,**” writes James. “**My brothers [and sisters], this should not be.**” **[LIVE]** This should not be because it represents a contradiction between our stated interest in loving God and our actual practice in loving the people he loves. This should not be so because we can’t develop the remarkable relationships we want until we focus on those regular practices that keep us from them.

You see, there’s a tricky thing about a horse’s bit, a ship’s rudder, a tiny spark, or an untamed tongue. Their effect is not always obvious in a single moment. They change the course of things by slow degrees. **[SLIDE 16]** We start out flying high and hope to go higher still. Isn’t this our dream? We tell ourselves that we long for the best -- and we do. **[SLIDE 17]** And then, little by little, through our *careless way with words*, our relationships wind up where we never wanted them to be. I am no longer mystified about why or how this happens. I’m humbled by how I’ve failed in these ways.

**[LIVE]** But, what I’m *now* curious about is how *better* things happen. I’m curious about how this regular way of communicating gets replaced by a more remarkable way. Aren’t you? **[SLIDE 18]** What does it look like to learn to speak more wisely? What does it mean in practice to speak with a grace that is greater than the gravity of sin and life’s weight? God has a hopeful, transforming Word to speak to us on that subject. **[LIVE]** And that’s what we’ll be returning to discover afresh together, when we gather here next week.

Please pray with me...

*Lord, as no one else does, you know the reality of our relationships and the part that we play in them. We ask your forgiveness and the forgiveness of those we have injured (knowingly and unknowingly) by our careless way with words. You have said in YOUR Word that "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" (Jam 3:17). As we go forth today, seeking to live anew, help us to find our way into this, YOUR way. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*

---

<sup>1</sup> John M. Gottman, *The Seven Principles for Making a Marriage Work*, p.16

<sup>2</sup> Doug McKinley, *Mad About Us*, p.57