

THE BOOK OF JAMES - 3

3:1-18 Self Control: Faith's Production

The Challenge of Chapter Three

One of the greatest indicators of maturity in our Christian life is the ability to control our tongue. There is great power available for both good and evil through the words we speak. We must guard against blessing God with our lives while at the same time, speaking against His children. We must constantly seek God's wisdom in our lives, which is found in the Word of God. The wisdom we have received from God should be displayed in our sincere love for the saints.

1. The Controlled Tongue (1-2)

Many in James's congregation aspired to be teachers of the Word of God because they had been exposed to so many teachers in the church at Jerusalem. James warns them that teachers have a higher accountability before the Lord. He also explains that the greatest Mark of maturity is the ability to control the tongue.

A. Not Many Should Become Teachers of the Word

Jas 3:1 My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.

My brethren, be (ginomai: become) not many (of you) masters (didaskaloi: teachers), knowing that we shall receive greater condemnation (heavier judgment).

In this verse, James is not attacking the office of the teacher or discouraging his people from desiring the office. He is just trying to stop them from rushing to become teachers. He wants them to understand the office of a teacher is solemn and has a heavy responsibility attached to it. Because their pastor was also a teacher (Ephesians 4: 11-12), and they had been exposed to many other gifted teachers, many members in James's congregation wanted to become ministers of the Word of God. Jerusalem was the center for Christianity, and because of that, many ministers passed through during every season of the year. It was very desirable to minister in the Jerusalem church (Galatians 1: 17, 22), so those who were selected were probably the best of the best. These teachers became heroes to the congregation, and many in the congregation desired to imitate them (2 Corinthians 10:12). James wanted them to know the awesome request they had made. They desired the esteem of being a teacher without paying the price demanded by the position (1 Timothy 1:7). The judgment handed down on teachers will occur at the judgment seat of Christ.

B. The Test of the Tongue

Jas 3:2 For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.

For in many things we offend all (all stumble). If any man offend (stumble) not in word, the same is a perfect man (aner), and able also to bridle the whole body.

Teachers of the Word of God are not exempt from failure and the ability to sin. James includes himself in the group who stumble, as all men do (1 Kings 8:46, Proverbs 20:9, Ecclesiastes 7:20, Romans 3:9, 23, 1 John 1:8). Teachers of the Word face greater condemnation than others because of their visibility before the world. They are seen in the pulpit advocating the life of righteousness and the world expects them to live it. They all make mistakes from time to time, just as do the members of the congregation.

The greatest test of self-control for a minister (or anyone) is the test of the tongue. If a person cannot control their tongue and not offend with their words, they have arrived at maturity. Attached to our will is our tongue. The true mark of maturity is the ability to handle both our emotions and our words. If a person can “bridle” the tongue, he can control any area of life. This mark of maturity is illustrated in Luke 11:53-54 and 1 Peter 2:21-23. The tongue of the teacher is under much more scrutiny than the tongue of others. James is telling these people not to run after the office of the teacher before examining its responsibilities.

2. The Need for Control over the Tongue (3-6)

James instructs and exhorts his congregation about the power in the tongue. He explains that as a bit can turn a horse and a rudder a ship, so the tongue has the ability to turn the course of the circumstances of life.

A. The Tongue: A Small Member with Great Power

Jas 3:3 Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body.

Behold, we put bits in the horse's mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about (metagomen: to change the direction of) their whole body.

The purpose of the bit in the mouth is to turn the whole body of the horse. The analogy of the bit is to the tongue, one small thing that can control our whole body and course of life. We want our body and circumstances to obey us. This can only be done with a soul full of the Word of God and a tongue under the control of the inner man. This type of life controls the nature of the flesh;

circumstances will obey and give glory to the Lord. The flesh is already set on a course toward sin and lust. The world is already set on a course (Ephesians 2:2) toward hell.

In either case, we do not have to follow the course set by Satan, but rather we can change our direction toward God. This is accomplished by the Word of God and our tongue.

Jas 3:4 Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth.

Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm (rudder), whithersoever (whatever the impulse of) the governor (captain) listeth (desires).

A horse has a will, and the ship does not. The horse is a type of the flesh and the ship of circumstances. The tongue, like the bit and the rudder, can change both. This is the power of the tongue. The horse can be changed rapidly to go in another direction, and the ship changes course slowly.

The body, though rebellious, can be changed quickly to go in another direction, but circumstances need time. The ships of the ancient world were very large (often the size of a football field) and carried many people and much cargo (Acts 27: 37-38). The direction could be changed, but time was needed.

B. The Tongue Can Produce Great Destruction

Jas 3:5 Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!

Even so (outos: in this manner), the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. . . .

A horse's bit is small compared to the size of its body; a ship's rudder is small compared to the entire ship. The human tongue is small in comparison to the great things it boasts of. The results are out of proportion to the size of the agent producing them.

. . . Behold, how great a matter (how much wood) a little (small) fire kindleth.

The contrast between the small and great continues. A small match or even a spark can ignite an entire forest into a huge fire. The tongue can unleash uncontrollable forces into the world and destroy whole areas of the society.

Jas 3:6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell.

And the tongue is a fire, a world (kosmos) of iniquity . . .

“The tongue is a fire” is an analogy for the destructive force of the tongue (Psalm 57:4; Proverbs 16:26, 26:18-21). In this verse, the tongue is the kindling, and the “world of iniquity” is the forest fire that can result. We do not need the devil to stir up a whole world of iniquity; our tongues can do it instead.

. . . so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course (cycle of existence) of nature; and it is set on fire of hell.

What is in the invisible world will control the visible. The tongue can change the whole cycle of existence around us. Words, which cannot be seen, can devastate what can be seen. Words spoken in secret can have a devastating effect for months and even years. Words seem to disappear into the unseen world, but they can affect people’s emotions, shape whole nations, and even affect entire generations.

The tongue is centrally located. It can turn the world around for good or for evil; out of the mouth comes blessing or cursing. First, it is able to kindle a small fire and then an entire forest fire. The tongue can defile our body; it can set sickness, poverty, and oppression in motion, and even open the door for demonic activity. The destruction does not stop with our body, but continues on to bring destruction to every aspect of the world system that surrounds us. Entire churches, cities, and nations have been toppled and overthrown by the use of a single tongue.

The origin of this “fire” is hell itself. Satan ultimately caused sin to erupt in eternity past (Isaiah 14; Ezekiel 28). He is the one who tempted the woman in the garden and introduced the nature of the flesh into the human race (Romans 5:12). Satan is the silent one who continues to seek control of the entire human race. He accomplishes this today through man’s tongue, especially those in the body of Christ.

3. The Impossibility of Taming the Tongue (7-8)

James continues by teaching that the tongue is more difficult to tame than any animal created by God and that it can be evil and full of deadly venom.

Jas 3:7 For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind:

For every kind (phusis: species) of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed (damazo: subdued), and hath been tamed of (by) mankind (phuseithanthropine: the human species):

Man was commanded by God to subdue the planet and take authority over every class of animal God had created (Genesis 1:26, 9:2; Psalm 8:6-8). The word for “tamed” (damazo) is found in Mark 5:4 in reference to the demon-possessed man in Gadera.

Jas 3:8 But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

But the tongue can (dunamis: is able, has the power) no man tame; it is an unruly (akatastaton: restless) evil, full of deadly poison.

In his own natural strength, man cannot subdue the tongue. It is only through knowledge or God’s Word and being doers of the Word that the tongue is controlled. The longer we walk with the Lord, the easier it becomes to control the tongue. As a member of the human body, the tongue is cursed more than any other body member, or even any creature on the face of the earth. No creature is directly linked to Satan in the way man is, which is a consequence of the fall. The tongue can be directly linked to hellfire and Satan’s control (verse 6). The tongue of the serpent is considered poison in the Word of God (Psalm 58:4, 140:3).

4. The Inconsistency of the Tongue (9-12)

James observes his congregation lifting their hands in praise and worship to God one moment and judging and backbiting each other the next. He strongly chastises the congregation, explaining that the tongue that blesses God and curses His children is contrary to the new nature they have in Christ.

Jas 3:9 Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God.

Therewith (with the same tongue) bless (eulogomen: extol) we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude (likeness) of God.

The tongue is probably more closely linked to the two natures of the believer than any part of the human anatomy. With one breath the tongue, under the control of the Holy Spirit and human spirit, can bless God. With the next breath, under the influence of the flesh, it can curse man. After praising God, it is hypocritical to curse our brothers and sisters who are created in God’s image, both spiritually and physically. How can we praise God and then curse what He has made? How can we curse the same creation He sent His Son to die for and redeem?

Jas 3:10 Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be.

The tongue is an enigma; it is an indicator of what is in the heart. No man can truly bless the Lord while feeling hatred toward his brother in the Lord (1 John 4:20). Yet James had observed many in his congregation praise God and then turn around and carve others up with their tongues. James has seen the Pharisees, under the control of religious zeal, doing this very thing (John 7:47-49). James does not want his congregation to be taken up with a religious spirit that comes from the author of the curse itself, Satan. In one breath, James both loves and chastises his congregation. He says, "My brethren, these things ought not so to be."

James is addressing a group of people who come to church, enjoy the praise and worship service, and lift up their hands to bless the Lord. During this same service, they use the same word to malign, ridicule, and judge their brothers and sisters in the Lord. They are not long-suffering and patience with the faults of others in the way the Lord is long-suffering toward them. They do not realize the Lord will deal more harshly with their sins of maligning others than with the sins of those they are judging (Matthew 7:1-5).

Jas 3:11 Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?

When a traveler comes across a fountain of water gushing from the rock, he would not expect that at one moment the water would be sweet and suddenly find it replaced with bitter, salty, and rusty water. If this repeatedly occurred, the traveler would be shocked. This is how God feels when we first offer Him praise from our mouth and then immediately backbite others in the church. Both statements are directed toward Him, whether we realize it or not (Matthew 25: 34-40). James is saying nature is more consistent than some Christians.

Jas 3:12 Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.

In both verses, James asks redundant questions. The obvious answer to these questions is no. This means that the obvious answer to the question about the tongue is also no.

James also covered the obvious areas of water and food in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:16-20). Water and food are necessities for human life, and a person hunting for one of them in obvious places would be surprised to find something else; A fig tree with olives? A grape vine with figs (which normally grow on a tree)? And what if the Dead Sea, which always produces saltwater, would suddenly began producing fresh water? Each of these examples were common in Palestine and to the congregation at Jerusalem. These things are contrary to nature. A tongue that blesses and curses is contrary to the new nature.

5. The Wisdom of Controlling the Tongue (13-18)

James explains to his congregation that wisdom received from God should be evidenced in their daily lives by keeping a humble and teachable attitude. He shows that wisdom that produces no meekness or love toward others is no different than the world's wisdom. James sees jealousy and division in his congregation which, he explains, reflects an attitude of evil. He exhorts them to seek for true wisdom which comes directly from God through His Word. This type of wisdom should manifest as sincere love for the saints.

A. The Lifestyle of Wisdom

Jas 3:13 Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom.

Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge (epistemi) among you? Let him show (deixato: demonstrate) out of a good conversation (lifestyle) his works with meekness and wisdom.

James is saying that wisdom, like faith (2:14-26), must be proven by lifestyle. True understanding will produce a teachable attitude and wisdom made evident to men through works. These works must be produced and meekness (praus: teachableness) and wisdom. Words and actions are what will win the world around us to the Lord (Colossians 3:17). These words and actions must be a true outward representation of the understanding of the Word in our hearts.

B. Attitudes of the Heart

Jas 3:14 But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth.

But if ye have bitter envying (zelon: jealousy) and strife (epitheion: factions) in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth.

The word "bitter" is the same word used to describe the water in verse 11. It is now being used to refer to the inward attitude, which produces evil words and works. James sees these two attributes, jealousy and factions, among the congregation at Jerusalem, attributes James also saw in the religious leaders of the day.

The attitude from the religious leaders was a defending of the law and the punishment of those who disobeyed. A judgmental attitude was coming from them and now the same attitude was coming from the people in the local church. Factions were forming that were produced from the hearts of the people.

The Greek word epitheian (cf. Romans 2:8; 2 Corinthians 12:20; Galatians 5:20; Philippians 1:17, 2:3; James 3:14, 16) denotes a willingness to use unworthy and divisive means to promote one's

own views or interest. With these types of attitudes, the people are also trying to admit they are right when they know the Word tells them they are wrong. Now they are not only in opposition to James, but also God and His Word. They are glorying (boasting) and lying against the truth. Jealousy and factions have produced an arrogance against each other and, the absolute standard in life, the Word of God.

C. Wisdom from Satan's World

Jas 3:15 This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish.

This wisdom descendeth not from above but is earthly (epigeios: springing from the earth), sensual (psuchike: soulish), devilish (daimoniodes: demon inspired).

“This wisdom” is the summary of verse 14. What the people are calling wisdom is proceeding from a heart filled with jealousy and factions. It can only produce a lifestyle of the same. James now explains that this type of wisdom is not God's, but Satan's. A wisdom that produces no meekness and love for others cannot be from the God who gives only good and perfect gifts (1:17). This type of wisdom the people are showing at this time is the same as the world shows. James calls it earthly (epigeios: springing from the earth) or originating from the world's system. Paul also makes a distinction between the two types of wisdom: the wisdom of the world (1 Corinthians 1:20, 2:5-6) and the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24, 2:7).

Next, James calls this type of wisdom sensual (psuchike: soulish). It springs from the world's system, man's own thinking, and nature of the flesh, not God's Spirit. Finally, James calls this wisdom devilish (daimoniodes: demon inspired) because the ultimate source of the world's system and man's nature of the flesh is Satan himself, who brought the curse into this world. Evil spirits are at work in the world to fulfill Satan's plans. They turned the world in a direction opposite of the gospel and regeneration and inspire believers to be filled with jealousy and divisions.

Jas 3:16 For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work.

For where envying (jealousy) and strife (factions) is (are), there is confusion (akatastasia: chaos) and every evil (phaulo: vile) work (pragma: deed).

Confusion and evil works are a result of verse 14. Verse 15 explains the source of jealousy and strife, and now James is telling his congregation where these two will lead. When there is an attitude of evil, it will surface in words and actions. This type of wisdom comes from the world and the flesh, and the devil produces confusion (akatastasia: chaos) and every evil (phulon: vile) work (pragma: deed). This is the result of the double-minded person (1:8). Throughout the church, there will always be confusion and evil works. The person who produces envying and

strife opens the door into the local church for Satan to bring in disruption and unruliness. This destroys harmony and peace, which should be present for any church to function in power.

D. Characteristics of God's Wisdom

Jas 3:17 But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.

But the wisdom (sophia) that is from above is first pure (clean and undefiled), then peaceable, gentle (epieikes: considerate, courteous and kind), and easy to be entreated (eupeithes: to be easily persuaded), full of mercy, and good fruits, without partiality (adiakritos: variance), and without hypocrisy (anupokritos).

True wisdom is contrasted with the false wisdom from the previous verses. The wisdom mentioned previously originates from Satan and is therefore, from below in contrast to God's wisdom, which is from above. True wisdom first comes from the Father (1:8) and is therefore "good and perfect."

The first characteristic of true wisdom (sophia) is purity. It is free from all vices such as jealousy and factions. It does not want to see others put down rather, sophia wants to see them lifted up and cared for. This word is also used for Jesus in 1 John 3:3 as a pattern for all believers.

Next, true wisdom is peaceable. This is an outward manifestation of purity. It does not pursue peace at the expense of purity. It will not compromise with sin to maintain peace.

The next characteristic of God's wisdom is that it is gentle. The Greek word epieikes means "to be considerate, courteous, and kind."

"Easy to be entreated" (eupeithes) means to be easily persuaded, being open to new light but never at the compromise of the truth. It is the opposite of stubborn and unyielding.

"Full of mercy and good fruits" deals again with the inner attitude and its outward manifestation. Mercy is the grace of God in action in our lives. We need to treat others with mercy just as God has treated us and continues to treat us. Mercy is a characteristic of God Himself (Psalm 86:5, 100:5, 103:8; Ephesians 2:40). Even in judgment, God deals with us in mercy (James 2:13). God wants us to deal with each other in mercy (Isaiah 58:6; Hosea 6:6; Micah 6:8; Matthew 23:23; Luke 10:37).

This divine wisdom is also without partiality (adiakritos: variance). This type of wisdom acts consistently; it does not take one position under one circumstance and another in a different circumstance. It is the direct opposite of the double-minded man with the uncontrolled tongue (3: 9-12).

In the Greek, the last phrase “without hypocrisy” (anupokritos) means “one who does not speak from behind a mask” or “one who does not put on an outward show that is different from what is in his heart.” This is also the chief word for “phony” or “one who puts on a facade.” The person without hypocrisy is genuine in his testimony and life for the Lord. His faith before the Lord is exactly what his life is before the world.

Jas 3:18 And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.

And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of (for) them that make peace.

This verse is the result of true wisdom just as verse 16 is the result of false wisdom. Even at the time of sowing, the fruit is anticipated. When we, as believers, walk in God’s wisdom and are doing so in purity, peace, gentleness, mercy, impartiality, and with integrity, it may be some time before the fruit is manifested; but patience is at work, and the harvest will come.

Righteousness cannot be cultivated with strife and turmoil present. James sees a believer going through this whole process of sowing, waiting, and harvesting in peace. The believer is at peace with God and others around them and cannot help but cultivate and promote peace (Matthew 5:9; Ephesians 6:15).

Chapter Summary

James stresses the power and importance of the tongue and how the words of our tongue affects the course of our lives. It can be a very destructive force in the earth, not only in our personal lives, but also in cities, nations, and generations. A mature man learns to control his tongue; he seeks the wisdom that comes from God rather than walking in the wisdom of the world, which manifests in hypocrisy, strife, and division. When we walk in true wisdom, it will be in purity, gentleness, mercy, impartiality, and peace as a testimony before the world.