

James Lesson 3

James Chapter 3

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Memory verses for this week: *Prov 16:7 When a man's ways please the LORD, he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him.*

Introduction: In chapter 2 of James, we found that we are to treat all men and women the same. A poor person and a rich person should be treated equally. We also discussed how we should treat others as we want to be treated, and that our works should always be present to prove our salvation. In chapter 3, we will be studying how we can use the tongue for both good and bad.

I. The Power of Small Things

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

James 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.

The term masters here seems to mean teachers. We know that the teacher has a greater responsibility than the pupil, and should know what he or she is teaching. Verse 2 says that if we offend not in words, we are perfect Christians. This does not mean that we are without sin, but it means we are mature. Perhaps the most difficult perfection to obtain is in reference to our tongue. James tells us that it is harder to do right in talking than in anything else. If we can control how we speak, we can control the whole body.

James' advice is simple. Rather than advancing oneself as a teacher, we rather ought to be willing to listen. Too often, there is a temptation to assume leadership when in reality we don't know what we are talking about.

In many cases, God's work would be better served if we were swift to hear and slow to speak. Those who would exalt themselves, in this case to be a teacher (spiritual leader), would do well to remember unto whom much is given, much shall be required. These will be held to a higher standard, both by others as well as by God. The greater lesson is to be reticent about opening our mouths to dispense our assumed wisdom. Those that do will face greater criticism than those who are more discreet. The chapter will more fully develop how these self-proclaimed 'teachers' were in reality those seeking to be leaders.

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

James 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.

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

James uses three illustrations of small things and their power.

1. A bridle used for a horse is a small thing, yet with that bridle a person can guide the horse wherever he desires.
2. He uses the helm of a big ship as an example. A helm is a little instrument that makes a large ship go in any direction desired.
3. Verse 5 uses the example of the little fire that could burn up great things. The tongue is like this.

The tongue is very powerful, and can be used to do a lot of good. It can be used to teach right things to people. However, if used wrongly, it can be like a fire that destroys much. A few wrong words can destroy more in a few moments than the church can build up in a year. The lost person can be greatly hindered from being saved by wrong words. If we want progress for our church (and our personal lives), we must learn to use right words, and never use those that hurt or destroy. Christians can be hindered because some one said something that they should not have spoken.

James provides two simple illustrations from everyday life in this regard.

The bit of a bridle is a relatively small piece of hardware. A typical bit may not weigh more than one pound. Yet, from that small bit, a horseman can control and turn around the one-thousand pound body of the horse. The bit is small but powerful in its effect.

James describes great ships. Notwithstanding high winds and rough seas, they are turned by a relatively small rudder at the will of the wheelsman.

The word translated as helm (phdalion pedalion) refers to the actual rudder of the vessel rather than its wheel. The point remains the same. A massive ship is steered and controlled by a relatively small device called the rudder. The application of the point is in the next verse. In the same fashion as illustrated above, the human tongue is a relatively small organ of the human body. However, it makes big claims.

The tongue is a primary delivery vehicle of pride. Just as a bit in a horse's mouth or the rudder of a ship can change the course of action of greater things, so does the tongue. James now adds another analogy to the point he is making.

“Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!”

One small match can cause a great inferno. The effect of the tongue is remarkably similar.

Prov 6:16 These six things doth the LORD hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him:

Prov 6:17 A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood,

Prov 6:18 An heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief,

Prov 6:19 A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren.

Verse 19 says that God hates the man who sows discord among brethren. Probably nothing hurts the harmony in a church than a brother or sister with a loose tongue that uses it to demean and hurt fellow church members. An unwise or unkind word spoken may be the beginning of big trouble that may cause strife and division in the church. This is not God's will for the church.

2 Cor 13:11 Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you.

Phil 2:2 Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.

Phil 2:3 Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.

Phil 2:4 Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.

II. The Impossibility of Man Taming the Tongue

James 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.

An unruly tongue defiles the whole body, and can set on fire the course of nature. Satan uses the tongues of men to accomplish his purposes.

J. Vernon McGee said this about the tongue.

The tongue is like a fire; when it is under control, it is a blessing; when it is out of control, it is devastating. It can be a cure, or it can be a curse. In Proverbs 12:18 we read, "There is that speaketh like the piercings of a sword: but the tongue of the wise is health." The tongue can be like a sword that kills, but it also can be health itself. What a picture this is of the tongue! Again in Proverbs we read, "The heart of him that hath understanding seeketh knowledge: but the mouth of fools feedeth on foolishness" (Prov. 15:14).

Let me repeat the proverb I quoted a little earlier: "Thou art master of the unspoken word, but the spoken word is master of you." If you haven't said it, you cannot be held responsible, but once you've said it, it can condemn you. I have learned through personal experience that a slip of the tongue (especially if it's made on a radio broadcast which is heard by many) can have great repercussions. You remember that Simon Peter's tongue betrayed him, and he denied that he knew his Lord. But on the Day of Pentecost, what was it that the Lord used? It was the tongue of that blundering, stumbling, bumbling fellow, Simon Peter. The tongue can be either a curse or a cure.

Brush and forest fires scorch and blacken and are a plague. Like a fire, the tongue can burn through a church, burn through a community, burn through a town, and even burn through a nation.

James 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:

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

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

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

The wild beasts, birds, serpents, and animals of the sea have been tamed by man. However, even though we can tame wild animals, he is not able to tame the tongue. James says the tongue is an unruly member that is full of deadly poison. We sometimes use it to bless God, and then turn and use it to curse men. These things should not be in the life of a Christian.

All manner of wild animals, birds, and marine creatures have been tamed, trained, and even domesticated by mankind. Notwithstanding that mankind can tame wild animals, they have never tamed their own tongues. Moreover, James teaches that the natural human tongue is not tameable. It is an "unruly evil."

The word translated as unruly (akataschetov akataschetos) has the sense of being 'unable to be restrained.' The tongue, furthermore, is full of deadly venom. Between our lips is an organ with terrible potential.

With the same tongue that we utter praise to God, we also speak evil of others. Moreover, those whom we would malign, ironically, are made in the likeness of God. James makes reference to Genesis 1:26-27 regarding how that God created man in His image and likeness.)

Less than ironic is that out of the same mouth proceeds blessing and cursing. His advice therefore is simple. "My brethren, these things ought not so to be."

Matthew Henry in his commentary points out how hard the tongue is to control.

As if the apostle had said, "Lions, and the most savage beasts, as well as horses and camels, and creatures of the greatest strength, have been tamed and governed by men: so have birds, notwithstanding their wildness and timorousness, and their wings to bear them up continually out of our reach: even serpents, notwithstanding all their venom and all their cunning, have been made familiar and harmless: and things in the sea have been taken by men, and made serviceable to them. And these creatures have not been subdued nor tamed by miracle only (as the lions crouched to Daniel, instead of devouring him, and ravens fed Elijah, and a whale carried Jonah through the depths of the sea to dry land), but what is here spoken of is something commonly done; not only hath been tamed, but is tamed of mankind.

Yet the tongue is worse than these, and cannot be tamed by the power and art which serves to tame these things. No man can tame the tongue without supernatural grace and assistance." The apostle does not intend to represent it as a thing impossible, but as a thing extremely difficult, which therefore will require great watchfulness, and pains, and prayer, to keep it in due order. And sometimes all is too little; for it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. Brute creatures may be kept within certain bounds, they may be managed by certain rules, and even serpents may be so used as to do not hurt with all their poison; but the tongue is apt to break through all bounds and rules, and to spit out its poison on one occasion or other, notwithstanding the utmost care. So that not only does it need to be watched, and guarded, and governed, as much as an unruly beast, or a hurtful and poisonous creature, but much more care and pains will be needful to prevent the mischievous outbreakings and effects of the tongue.

II. Nature Shows Only One Thing from a Plant

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

James 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.

A fountain that brings forth sweet water does not suddenly bring forth bitter. The fountain is consistent. Fig trees bring forth figs, as a berry vine brings forth berries. They do not bring forth some other type of fruit. In man, we may bring forth both good and bad, and this is not pleasing in God's sight.

James sets forth several more analogies from nature condemning the inconsistency of the tongue. He asks, "Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?"

The answer is obvious. It will be one or the other. He asks, "Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs?" Common knowledge understands that a fig tree does not produce olives. Neither does a grape vine grow figs. Thus, the obvious application is that our tongues ought not utter that which is both right and evil. The apostle does not represent it as impossible, but as extremely difficult.

No man can control the tongue without divine grace and assistance. Taming something and controlling it is altogether different.

Jerry Falwell in the King James Study Bible made this comment about verse 12.

The last clause of verse 12 differs from those that precede it. The former are questions that attempt to illustrate; this one is a statement to teach. As salt water cannot make sweet water, so the person who curses others cannot bless God. The cursing of people truly indicates what lies within a person.

III. The Wisdom From Above

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

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

A wise man is a man of faith. He is one that is subject to the leadership of the Holy Spirit, and has a teachable spirit about him or her. A wise person will manifest true spiritual state by good behavior. Their speech will be with meekness of wisdom. The conclusion of this entire matter, from Chapter 1:19 through chapter 3, is at hand. Let's read a few of the verses in Chapter 1 to get the context of all the teaching and the subject.

James 1:19 Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath:

James 1:20 For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.

James 1:21 Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.

James 1:22 But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.

James 1:23 For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass:

James 1:24 For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was.

James 1:25 But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.

Therefore and in light of all this teaching about the tongue, James asks, “Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you?” The thought is of one who is wise and knowledgeable. Here, Gods Word says, “let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom.”

The thought undoubtedly hearkens back to verse 1 of this chapter, referring to those who advanced themselves as (wise) teachers. If they so considered themselves such, James advised for them to first demonstrate through their lives whatever wisdom they claimed to possess.

The word translated as conversation (anastrofh ana- strophe) refers to one’s manner of life. In other words, if one professed to be wise enough to be a leader of others, let him first demonstrate that wisdom in how he lives. James further qualifies that with the comment, “with meekness of wisdom.” The word translated as meekness (prauthv prautes) refers to an even-natured disposition, control of emotions, and gentleness of spirit.

Clearly implied is that true wisdom will manifest itself in disciplined emotions. Someone who is hot tempered and quick to jump to conclusions is never a person being led by the Holy Spirit. We should be calm and steady, constantly letting God direct our steps and our tongue. Godly wisdom, to the degree of being a spiritual leader, requires one to have not only his tongue under control but his emotions and temperament as well.

Matthew Henry in his commentary made these notes about verse 13.

Who is a wise man, and endued with knowledge among you? Let him show out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom, v. 13. A truly wise man is a very knowing man: he will not set up for the reputation of being wise without laying in a good stock of knowledge; and

he will not value himself merely upon knowing things, if he has not wisdom to make a right application and use of that knowledge. These two things must be put together to make up the account of true wisdom: who is wise, and endued with knowledge? Now where this is the happy case of any there will be these following things:—1. A good conversation. If we are wiser than others, this should be evidenced by the goodness of our conversation, not by the roughness or vanity of it.

Words that inform, and heal, and do good, are the marks of wisdom; not those that look great, and do mischief, and are the occasions of evil, either in ourselves or others. 2. True wisdom may be known by its works. The conversation here does not refer only to words, but to the whole of men's practice; therefore it is said, Let him show out of a good conversation his works. True wisdom does not lie in good notions or speculations so much as in good and useful actions. Not he who thinks well, or he who talks well, is in the sense of the scripture allowed to be wise, if he do not live and act well.

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

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

James clearly is describing how some deformed themselves. “But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth.”

Bitter envy and strife surely reflects neither wisdom nor the meekness defined above. Some who sought to be leaders, very possibly, may have been so afflicted. He admonishes them to not advance themselves and believe the very truth they claimed to teach. To live in such a carnal spiritually immature way is to discredit the very truth being taught.

As the old adage says, ‘Our talk talks, and our walk talks. But our walk talks louder than our talk talks.’ This is so true. It is pretty easy to say what we should do, it is a whole different matter to apply that and live it day to day.

Bitterness and strife contradict and betray purported wisdom in leadership.

“This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish.”

A professed wisdom (in a preacher or leader) which manifests a sharp tongue, a bitter spirit, and an envious attitude is an oxymoron. Such wisdom is not from God. Recall how James began the book by noting that true wisdom is always available from God.

James 1:5 If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.

Rather, the false wisdom purported by those advancing themselves as spiritual leaders was “earthly, sensual, devilish.” The word translated as earthly (epigeiov epigeios), though literally referring to the terrestrial, for all practical purposes in this context, has the sense of ‘worldly.’

Then the word translated as devilish (daimoniwdhv daimoniodes) refers to being demon-like. In short, James describes such behavior described above as of the world, the flesh, and the devil. That unholy triumvirate is the essence of the godless culture around us. It exemplifies the enemy of God as will be noted in James 4:4.

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

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

Two wisdoms stand out in vivid contrast. One that is of the earth and one that is of heaven. The earthly wisdom is of the world and is according to nature. It produces envy, strife, lack of restfulness, and every other unholy work. In contrast, the wisdom that comes from heaven is the fullness of wisdom found in Christ. Only those who know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior have this wisdom. Christ’s wisdom is pure, peaceable, and gentle. For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work.

These self proclaimed spiritual leaders possessed and fueled envy and strife. (Noted in verse 14).

James points out that such carnal immaturity rather led to all manner of corruption.

The final phrase, “confusion and every evil work,” is loaded with several pointed thoughts. The word translated as confusion (akatastasia akatastasia) has the thoughts of ‘instability,’ a ‘state of disorder,’ ‘disturb-ance,’ or ‘confusion.’

The foul properties of “envying and strife” lead to all manner of upheaval. God is not the author of confusion. Envy and a bitter spirit leave a pathway strewn with the mess of chaos and confusion.

The word translated as evil (faulov phaulos) refers to that which is morally wicked. The word translated as work (pragma pragma) is whence the English word pragmatic or pragmatism derive. It has the sense of accomplishment without principle.

What a foul track record follows after envy and a bitter spirit. It will produce an unanticipated harvest of foul, wicked, and unprincipled actions. That is the effect of a untamed tongue and a sharp temper.

In verse 17, James describes briefly the essence of Godly wisdom in seven ways.

It first is pure. In distinction to the phallic impurity noted in the preceding verse, godly wisdom is indeed pure. It is peaceable. In contrast to the strife generated by the carnal, worldly wisdom described above, godly wisdom is peaceful and brings peace. Third, it is gentle. Fourth, it is easy to be intreated.

Fifthly, it is “full of mercy and good fruits.” Godly wisdom is merciful and produces good fruits. In other words, it is kind and good.

And the number six way is that Godly wisdom is also without partiality.

Finally, Godly wisdom is without hypocrisy. Godly wisdom is never phony nor of false pretense.

J. Vernon McGee pointed out that if we are truly of God, it will show and we will be real.

“But the wisdom that is from above is first pure”—that is, it’s not mingled or mixed; it’s undiluted; it’s the original. It is that wisdom which comes down from God, and James clearly identifies it: it is “then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.”

Dr. Samuel Zwemer mentions the fact that false teaching always produces strife and envy and trouble. He says, “You cannot explain the wickedness of the world as merely human. It is human plus something, and that is why non-Christian religions are successful. They are supernatural, but from beneath.” Anything that causes divisions and strife—it matters not which church it is in—is not of the Lord, you may be sure of that. You may boast of your fundamentalism, but if you are causing strife, you are sailing under false colors.

In Verse 18, James draws this entire section together with the culminating statement, “And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.” The “fruit of righteousness” is wisdom.

In Proverbs 8, wisdom and righteousness are essentially equated with wisdom being a result of righteousness.

Prov 8:1 Doth not wisdom cry? and understanding put forth her voice?

Prov 8:2 She standeth in the top of high places, by the way in the places of the paths.

Prov 8:3 She crieth at the gates, at the entry of the city, at the coming in at the doors.

Prov 8:6 Hear; for I will speak of excellent things; and the opening of my lips shall be right things.

Prov 8:7 For my mouth shall speak truth; and wickedness is an abomination to my lips.

Prov 8:8 All the words of my mouth are in righteousness; there is nothing froward or perverse in them.

Prov 8:19 My fruit is better than gold, yea, than fine gold; and my revenue than choice silver.

Prov 8:20 I lead in the way of righteousness, in the midst of the paths of judgment:

Godly wisdom emanates from righteousness. It is righteousness personified. Thus the Godly wisdom described above is “sown in peace.” Such wisdom is set forth in such a way to effect peace and it is done by “them that make peace.”

What a contrast from the worldly carnal wisdom described earlier in the chapter. It produces strife, bitterness, confusion, and all manner of wickedness. Godly wisdom is sown in peace and results in peace. Here is the comparison of Godly wisdom versus the purported wisdom of immature, ambitious spiritual leaders. They manifested their carnality and immaturity through their quick tempers, sharp tongues, bitter spirits, and chaos left behind. Godly wisdom rather produces the sweet fruit of righteousness with its peaceful results.

We need to keep in mind that a tongue controlled by divine grace and can be a mighty instrument to be used for good. A tongue that is used by Satan can do a world of harm. How will you use your tongue in this upcoming year? I pray we will all let God guide us by the leadership of the Holy Spirit and bring honor to God in so doing.

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Prov 4:18 But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.

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Practice Random Acts of Kindness. Each act spreads, and many will be blessed.