

James Chapter 3

Verses 1-2: The word “masters” (Greek didaskaloi), would today be translated “teachers.” (The theme of chapter 3), often regarded as the tongue, is more properly the teacher”. The chapter progresses from the teacher to his primary tool, the tongue (verses 2-12), then to the source of his teaching, his wisdom (verses 13-18).

James must warn the many who were seeking to teach in the church, since in the early church it was an easy matter to teach in the synagogue as well. Both Jesus and Paul demonstrate that even strangers could teach (Acts 13-15). Anyone who thought he had the “gift” to teach would also want to use it (1 Cor. 12:8, 28), and it was misused (1 Cor. 14:26; 1 Tim. 1:7).

James’s warning is twofold:

- (1) The teacher will receive greater scrutiny from God, because the teacher often passes judgment upon his hearers; and
- (2) The primary teaching tool is the tongue, which no one can control sufficiently.

In this passage, James used the common Jewish literary device of attributing blame to a specific bodily member (Rom. 3:15; 2 Peter 2:14). He personified the tongue as being representative of human depravity and wretchedness. In this way, he echoed the scriptural truth that the mouth is a focal point and vivid indicator of man’s fallenness and sinful heart condition (Isa. 6:5; Matt. 15:11, 16-19; Mark 7:20-23; Rom. 3:13-14).

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

“Masters”: Meaning teachers, a word that refers to a person who functions in an official teaching or preaching capacity (Luke 4:16-27; John 3:10; Acts 13:14-15; 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11).

“Greater condemnation”: Or stricter judgment. The word translates “judgment” usually expresses a negative verdict in the New Testament and here refers to a future judgment:

- (1) For the unbelieving false teacher, at the second coming (Jude 14:15); and
- (2) For the believer, when he is rewarded before Christ (1. Cor. 4:35).

This is not meant to discourage true teachers, but to warn the prospective teacher of the role’s seriousness (Ezekiel 3:17-18; 33:7-9; Acts 20:26-27; Heb. 13:17).

This is a possible reminder to those who take authority upon themselves that has not been ordered of God. This is James speaking to, possibly, the Jews who wanted to teach the newcomers to the faith.

James includes himself in the last part of this, where he says that the teachers, who should know more, are in greater condemnation for the sins they commit, because they are operating in full knowledge. This is a warning to all teachers to not think of themselves above those they teach.

The true Teacher of all of us is the Holy Spirit of God. He will teach us all truth.

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."

Scripture contains much about all the evil which the tongue can cause. The tongue has immense power to speak sinfully, erroneously, and inappropriately, human speech is a graphic representation of human depravity.

“Offend”: This refers to sinning, or offending God’s Person. The form of the Greek verb emphasizes that everyone continually fails to do what is right.

“Perfect man”: “Perfect” may refer to true perfection, in which case James is saying that, hypothetically, if a human being were able to perfectly control his tongue, he would be a perfect man. But, of course, no one is actually immune from sinning with his tongue. More likely, “perfect” is describing those who are spiritually mature and thus able to control their tongues.

We have spoken in other lessons of the tongue being the evillest part of the body. This is why it is so important to allow God to control your tongue. The words that proceed out of a man's mouth reveal what he really is.

1 Peter 3:10 "For he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile:"

The tongue can do a great deal of harm, if it is not controlled of God. The tongue, controlled of God can do great good. When the tongue is controlled by God, the whole body is under the control of God. The words of the tongue originate in the heart of man. The heart is either, stayed upon God, or desperately wicked.

Verses 3-5: James provided several analogies that show how the tongue, even though small, has the power to control one’s whole person and influence everything in his life.

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

This is just showing that the tongue, controlled of God, is part of a body controlled by God. When the bit is in the horse's mouth, the rider can turn him with just a gentle pull on the reins. This is saying then, that a tongue controlled by God can cause the whole body to follow God.

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."

We see, a very large ship is guided by a very small part of the entire ship. This is true of us, as well. The heart is what we really are. The mouth, speaking from that heart, reveals to the world where we stand with God.

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

Words we speak affect those around us. If we speak evil, we will stir up strife among others. If we speak soothing words, the fire of hate and anger will be extinguished.

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."

“Tongue is a fire”: Like fire, the tongue’s sinful words can spread destruction rapidly, or as its accompanying smoke, those words can permeate and ruin everything around it.

“Defileth”: This means “to pollute or contaminate” (Mark 7:20; Jude 23).

The course of nature”: Better translated “the circle of life”, this underscores that the tongue’s evil can extend beyond the individual to affect everything in his sphere of influence.

“Hell”: A translation of the Greek word Gehenna (or valley of Hinnom). In Christ’s time this valley that lay southwest of Jerusalem’s walls served as the city dump and was known for its constantly burning fire. Jesus used that place to symbolize the eternal place of punishment and torment (Mark 9:43, 45).

To James, “hell” conjures up not just the place but the satanic host that will someday inherit it, they use the tongue as a tool for evil.

The tongue is a system (world), of iniquity that sets on fire the whole course of life, and is even set on fire by Satan (3:15).

James is speaking of a tongue which has not been dedicated to God. Cutting words can destroy people. Before we are saved, we all have a wicked tongue. I have always said, the reason it is so important to be baptized in the Holy Spirit, is because in so doing we turn the most evil part of our body over to the control of the Spirit of God.

When He has your tongue, He has you. (Verse 6 above), is speaking of the tongue, before we turn it over to the Spirit of God.

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:"

The word “tamed” (Greek *damazo*), occurs in only one other New Testament passage (Mark 5:4). About the maniac of Gadara, which helps us to establish the proper meaning of the word in James.

The “taming” has nothing to do with domesticating animals or training them to perform. The meaning is control or dominion. Mankind can control every lesser creature, but no one can control his own tongue.

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

“Can no man tame”: Only God, by His power, can do this (Acts 2:1-11).

In the verses above (verse 7 included), we see that the tongue is the most difficult thing in the world to tame. In fact, man cannot tame the tongue. Only God can tame the tongue. Here are a few verses on the evil of the tongue and what we are to do about it.

Psalms 34:13 "Keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile."

Psalms 50:19 "Thou givest thy mouth to evil, and thy tongue frameth deceit."

Peter 3:10 "For he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile:"

The only way that any of us can speak pure words is with a heart, mouth, and tongue dedicated to God. Let Jesus wash your heart in the blood of the Lamb (Jesus Christ), and speak pure words from a pure heart.

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

“Bless ... curse”: It was traditional for Jews to add “blessed be He”, to a mention of God’s name (Psalm 68:19, 35). However, the tongue also wishes evil on people made in God’s image. This points out the hypocritical inconsistency of the tongue’s activities.

“Made after the similitude of God”: Man was made in God’s image.

James explains that man is made in God’s image (Gen. 1:26, 27; 5:1), so to curse people and yet bless God is inconsistent. Though the fall of mankind has marred that image or likeness, James teaches that it still exists (as do Gen. 9:6 and 1 Cor. 11:7).

How can this be? We know that a pure heart speaks beauty to all, not just to God. In our society, we would call this two-faced. Jesus gave two commandments that covered all.

Mark 12:30-31 "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this [is] the first commandment." "And the

second [is] like, [namely] this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these."

Matthew 22:40 "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

It is an impossibility to love God and hate His creation.

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

To say we are a Christian is not enough. We must become Christlike, to truly be a Christian. When He was persecuted, He blessed. If our heart is truly stayed upon God, there would be no evil proceed from our mouth.

Verses 11-12: Three illustrations from nature demonstrate the sinfulness of cursing. The genuine believer will not contradict his profession of faith by the regular use of unwholesome words.

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

A well does not produce both bitter and sweet water at the same time. The well spoken of here, is the heart of man. Look at what Jesus said about this.

Matthew 12:34 "O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh."

Luke 6:45 "A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil: for of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh."

It is more than obvious in all this; a tongue that speaks evil comes from an impure heart.

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."

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.

There are many who profess Christianity who is not truly sold out to Christ. We are what we are in our inner man. The heart of man is the determining factor. This is one of the main reasons why I believe a person who is sold out to God cannot be possessed of a devil.

Light and darkness cannot dwell in the same place; the darkness is overcome by the Light. We must decide whether we will follow God, or whether we will follow Lucifer. We cannot do both. The Light of God, within us, does away with all darkness. The Light represents the sweet water. Darkness and salt water go hand in hand.

Verses 13-18: In (verse 13), James makes a transition from discussing teachers and the tongue to dealing with wisdom's impact on everyone's life. He supports the truth of Old Testament wisdom literature (Job to Song of Solomon), that wisdom is divided into two realms, man's and God's.

James 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."

“Wise man and endued with knowledge”: “Wise” is the common Greek word for speculative knowledge and philosophy, but the Hebrews infused it with the much richer meaning of skillfully applying knowledge to the matter of practical living.

The word for “understanding” is used only here in the New Testament and means a specialist or professional who could skillfully apply his expertise to practical situations. James is asking who is truly skilled in the art of living.

“Meekness”: This is the opposite of arrogance and self-promotion. The Greeks described it as power under control.

Beginning (at verse 13), James says that godly wisdom is necessary in a teacher. The teacher must exhibit a meek and practical application of the truth. One cannot teach what one does not live.

Wisdom, the kind that comes only from God, is a gift from God. Those who have wisdom, and the Holy Spirit has given them knowledge of God's Word, show the world by their actions and their speech, they are believers.

This is just saying, your life and your speech will reveal to those around you, who you are in Christ. Bragging of your position with Christ has no place. Those who truly have a wonderful relation with Christ do not need to brag. They are generally humble people who just love God.

Verses 14-18: Two wisdoms are expounded by teachers. The one from God is pure and promotes peace, ending in righteousness (verses 17-18). But the other is natural and demonic, visible in the teacher as jealousy and ambition (strife, Greek *eritheia*). The result of such teaching is evil living and confusion.

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

“Bitter envying”: The Greek term for “bitter” was used of undrinkable water. When combined with “jealousy” it defines a harsh resentful attitude toward others.

“Strife”: refers to self-seeking that engenders antagonistic and factionalism. The Greek word came to describe anyone who entered politics for selfish reasons and sought to achieve his agenda at any cost. (i.e. even if that means trampling on others).

Each of us has his own special place with Christ. He has not called us to the same job as someone else. We should never look at someone else and be jealous, or want what they have. To want something someone else has, even if it is their relation with Christ, is coveting. God called each of us to do a job for Him that He could entrust us with.

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

“From above”: Self-centered wisdom that is consumed with personal ambition is not from God.

“Earthly, sensual, devilish”: A description of man’s wisdom as:

- (1) Limited to earth;
- (2) Characterized by humanness, frailty, an unsanctified heart, and an unredeemed spirit; and
- (3) General by Satan’s forces (1 Cor. 2:14; 2 Cor. 11:14-15).

Bitterness and strife of all kinds come from the devil. All things that please the flesh are earthy, or of this earth. The spiritual things are not based on things of the earth. Lucifer was jealous and wanted to be God.

You can see that this type of earthly wisdom and power is not spiritual. We must come out of the world (Egypt), before we can go to the Promised Land (heaven). We must do away with all desires of the flesh to be of God.

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

“Confusion”: This is the confusion that results for the instability and chaos of human wisdom.

“Every evil work”: Literally “every worthless (or vile), work.” This denotes things that are not so much intrinsically evil as they are simply good for nothing.

The natural man does not receive the things of God. Envy and strife are of the flesh. We must crucify the flesh to live with Christ. Envy causes many other sins. Christians are in this world, but we should not be controlled by earthly desires.

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."

“Pure”: This refers to spiritual integrity and moral sincerity. Every genuine Christian has this kind of heart motivation (Psalm 24:3-4; 51:7; Matt. 5:8; Rom. 7:22-23; Heb. 12:14).

“Peaceable”: Means “peace loving” or “peace promoting” (Matt. 5:9).

“Gentle”: This word is difficult to translate, but most nearly means a character trait of sweet reasonableness. Such a person will submit to all kinds of mistreatment and difficulty with an attitude of kind, courteous, patient humility, without any thought of hatred or revenge (Matt. 5:10-11).

“Entreated”: Meaning willing to yield. The original term described someone who was teachable, compliant, easily persuaded, and who willingly submitted to military discipline or moral and legal standards. For believers, it defines obedience to God’s standards (Matt. 3:5).

“Full of mercy”: The gift of showing concern for those who suffer pain and hardship, and the ability to forgive quickly (Matt. 5:7; Rom. 12:8).

“Without hypocrisy”: The Greek word occurs only here in the New Testament and denotes a consistent, unwavering person who is undivided in his commitment and conviction and does not make unfair distinctions.

Notice the word "but" in the verse above. It shows a direct contrast to the earthly man. This has jumped to those who are sold out to God. The wisdom from above comes to the believers. This wisdom is stored in a heart that is pure. Knowing of the security that is in Christ brings peace. When we are at peace with God and man, we are gentle.

If we expect God to be merciful to us, we must be merciful to others. Christians should bear good fruit. You cannot be a Christian and a hypocrite at the same time. A true Christian is 100% the Lord's.

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

“Fruit of righteousness”: Good works that result from salvation (verse 17, Matt. 5:6; Gal. 5:22-23; phil. 1:11).

“Them that make peace”: Righteousness flourishes in a climate of spiritual peace.

Matthew 5:9 "Blessed [are] the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God."

John 4:36 "And he that reapeth receiveth wages, and gathereth fruit unto life eternal: that both he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together."

James Chapter 3 Questions

1. Why does it say in verse 1, they shall receive greater condemnation?
2. What is this a possible reminder of?
3. Who is the true Teacher of all?
4. If any man offend not in word, the same is a _____ man.
5. What is the evillest part of the body?
6. The tongue can do a great deal of harm, if it is not controlled of _____.
7. The words of the tongue originate in the _____.
8. Why do we put bits in the horses' mouths?
9. What changes the direction of a ship?
10. What reveals to the world where we are with God?
11. The tongue is a _____, a world of iniquity.
12. What is wrong with the tongue in verse 6?
13. What difficult things, to be tamed, were tamed in verse 7?
14. What is the unruly, evil tongue full of?
15. How is the only way any of us can speak pure words?
16. Therewith bless we the Father, and _____ men.
17. What were the 2 commandments that Jesus gave that covered all?
18. It is an impossibility to love God and hate His _____.
19. In verse 10, what did James say, ought not to be so?
20. To say we are a Christian is not enough. We must be _____.
21. Doth a fountain send forth at the same place _____ water and _____?
22. What is the well, spoken of in verse 11?
23. Why does the author believe that a true Christian cannot be possessed of a devil?

24. Wisdom is a _____ from ____.
25. What 2 things reveal to the world what you are in Christ?
26. What one word describes what wanting something that belongs to someone else is?
27. Where does bitterness and strife come from?