

### Chapter 3

3:1 James 3 begins with a warning to those who teach the Church – those who seek to teach should carefully consider this choice, as we will be subject to even greater judgment from God. Why? Based on what James discusses following this statement in chapter 3, because of the potential for our tongues to speak in deception and immorality. Those who teach the scriptures are held to a higher standard because they are responsible for the spread of the Gospel. They are to ensure the story of Christ is told in such a way that it is faithful to the message of the scriptures, and those who distort it will suffer horrid consequences (e.g. Rev 22:18-19).

As such, those who teach ought to hold themselves to the same standard as Paul himself did in Acts 17 with the Bereans. Although mentioned very briefly, the Berean Jews are regarded highly in the New Testament for their insistence on thoroughly testing everything Paul and Silas said with regard to the Messiah. They are said to be “more noble” than the Jews of Thessalonica, putting these evangelists to the test against the scriptures. In fact, it is because they knew the scriptures and tested what Paul and Silas taught that “many of them therefore believed” (17:12), as their focus on God’s Word equipped them to hear His Good News more readily than others. Students of the Word therefore occupy just as important a place as teachers. Those who teach God’s Word must remain vigilant in ensuring that their words line up with those of Scripture.

For a personal example here, I will often say, “I understand this to mean...” when interpreting a piece of Scripture, especially from the pulpit. The goal is to make clear that my own interpretation is not the final word on the matter, but rather one opinion among many with regard to interpretation. There are other times, however, when Scripture seems to speak very loudly and clearly on a particular topic (e.g. morality and standards for human sexuality, the love of God, the nature of God, and so on), and in these instances, I cannot help saying, “Scripture says \_\_\_\_\_.” In matters of uncertain interpretation, it is my practice to grant the power of interpretation to the listener. In matters where one questions the authority or character/nature of God, for instance, I speak up rather than adopt a laissez-faire attitude. In some things, we have no choice but to stand firm on the Word of God.

3:2-5a It is well-known that we are all subject to stumbling. As Paul says, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). The ESV continues v.2 with, “And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.” NIV has the even more perplexing, “Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.” Adamson’s commentary on this epistle helps to clarify the meaning of this verse with the rendering, “Only if such a man there be as never sins in what he says, only there would be a perfect man, able as with a bridle to control his whole body also.” James is not saying that some people never speak without thinking or anything of the sort; he is simply illustrating his first point that “we all stumble in many ways” by saying, “Only a perfect person could truly control everything they spoke.” That’s not us; that’s Christ alone.

By the examples of both horses and ships, James demonstrates that the tongue has great power in the same way that a small bit and a small rudder can control such powerful and large objects. James refers here not to the power of the tongue to speak in cursing and the like, but rather to

speak in such a way that it damages another. It is not the legs which boast, but the tongue – one of the smallest parts of the body becomes a force for great harm when it is used improperly.

For another illustration, I turn to the arguing couple who resorts to destructive names and insults which, following the altercation, end up causing permanent damage to the relationship. One careless word can have even more destructive force than a hand, at times.

3:5b-12 The tongue is continually identified as the source of a great many troubles for human beings. James calls it “a small fire” that will set ablaze an entire forest (3:5). Again, one small careless word can be the beginning of extraordinary problems.

James pulls from God’s command in Genesis to further illustrate his point. God commands human beings in Genesis 1:28 to “fill the earth and subdue it.” As of the time of James’ writing, he can confirm that human beings have, in fact, done what God commanded in this regard. Human beings have exercised control over all Creation – except that pesky tongue! We still produce careless words and falsehoods with just as much skill today as our ancestors ever did.

This section in particular revolves around the impure duality of the tongue, for we use our mouths both in pure ways (prayer, worship, etc.) and in impure ones (cursing others, foul language). The tongue serves in some ways as the embodiment of the conflict between the flesh and the Spirit – although it has been redeemed and can now function in a way that is holy, pleasing, and honoring to God, somehow it still seems to revert back to its original, corrupted state. James exhorts us to continue working toward the goal of taming the tongue, of bringing that “Spirit of self-control” of which Paul speaks in 2 Timothy 1:7 (which is within all those who follow Christ Jesus) to bear on the tongue to tame it. The goal is to ensure that the words we speak in all circumstances remain honoring and glorifying to our God.

3:13-18 It is fitting that James would move from an exhortation to tame the tongue into a discussion on wisdom. It is only with the wisdom that comes from the Spirit that the tongue can be truly tamed and brought into submission. It is wisdom that tells us when to speak and when to remain silent, wisdom which reminds us of the greatness of God compared with our own folly. If in wisdom we continue to submit ourselves to His Lordship, He can grant us a greater measure of His Spirit, that our tongues may truly fall in line with His will.

Notice here that James specifies even the way in which our works are to be done – not with boasting and pride, but “in the meekness of wisdom” (3:13). Faith without works is dead. Likewise, works done in the interest of selfish ambition are useless. Faith should naturally lead to humility and meekness. Meekness, it must be said, is not a willingness to let others run all over us; this is a modernized and unfit definition of the word. Meekness, in its original sense as used in Scripture, implies simply a quiet and gentle nature or a submissive spirit. We are equal with others, and so our submission is not because of inferiority, but out of kindness and love. If Christ Himself came to us as one who was meek, then we are to model ourselves after Him in exhibiting meekness ourselves.

The genuineness of our actions can be measured by the spirit in which they are performed. James therefore admonishes his audience to “not boast and be false to the truth” (3:14). Wisdom which leads us to boasting and falsehood is not true wisdom at all, James says, but is

rather “earthly, unspiritual, [and] demonic” (3:15). This contains some echoes of Paul’s theology, who in 1 Corinthians 2 would contrast “the wisdom of this age” against “the things of the Spirit of God” (1 Cor 2:6, 14). There is a distinct difference between the wisdom which the world touts and the true wisdom of the Spirit of God. This should come as no surprise, given that the world speaks of morality, truth, and much more in a manner that in no way even resembles the standards for morality and truth which the Spirit reveals in the scriptures. The wisdom of the Spirit sounds different from the wisdom of the world. An excellent example of the contrast between the wisdom of the world versus the wisdom of God comes from Acts 17, where Paul addresses the Athenian men of the Areopagus. This was the place where the wisest of the Greeks would assemble to discuss their ideas, for the Athenians especially were renowned for their wisdom. Some of the Athenians, in response to Paul’s claim that Jesus was raised from the dead, mocked him; others were intrigued, and resolved to listen further. Humanity will not be led to Christ by its own wisdom; it can only come to Him by being granted the wisdom of the Spirit.

This illustrates clearly that there are different forms of wisdom, and it is in fact possible for wisdom to be earthly and unspiritual. What would cause such a perversion of something so desirable as wisdom but the demonic powers? This is why James identifies the source of this worldly wisdom and says that it leads to “disorder and every vile practice” (3:16). It makes sense as well – if the goal of the demonic powers is to lead human beings away from Christ, then even our wisdom would have to be perverted so it does not lead us to Him. True wisdom, that which comes from God Himself, will always lead us back to Him.

As a result of this, “the wisdom from above” will naturally lead us to exhibit characteristics of God – we will be “pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere” (3:17). These attributes of God will naturally manifest in those who genuinely pursue His wisdom rather than that of the world. Notice that James specifically mentions impartiality here as an attribute of God – again lending credence to the idea that this book is written by James the Just. The word for “impartiality” here is actually a *hapax legomenon* – a term with only one use of which we are aware in a particular text. It appears nowhere else in the entirety of the Greek New Testament.

James concludes with the rather difficult phrase “...a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace” (3:18). Commentators acknowledge the difficulty of this statement not in the sense that it is disconnected from what precedes it, but that it can be difficult to discern the exact meaning of the phrase itself. The general meaning, Adamson notes, is that “the righteous mind must be a peace-loving, peacemaking mind, and must also work in and for peace, fostering peace” (see Adamson’s *The Epistle of James*, 156). What James is saying therefore is most likely boiled down to the idea that those who desire righteous thinking (i.e. wisdom) must do so by means of dwelling in a mindset of peace, rather than the discord embodied in the “disorder and vile practice[s]” of this world James previously mentioned. I understand this, in part, to draw on James’ previous words as if to say, “Just as wisdom develops over time as a result of the continued work of the Spirit of God within us, the fruit of righteousness (meaning wisdom) can only come about when we engage the practices of God.”