

Scripture Reading: James 3:1-12 (NASB - New American Standard Bible)

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²For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.

³Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. ⁴Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires.

⁵So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! ⁶And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. ⁷For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race.

⁸But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. ⁹With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; ¹⁰from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.

¹¹Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? ¹²Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.

Good morning, everyone. It is good to see you all again. I have been doing a series of sermons through the Epistle of James – my favorite book of the New Testament. In June, I covered Chapter 1 of the book, which discussed a variety of topics, including the benefits of enduring under trials, why we need to walk by faith, how to overcome temptation, and the importance of not only listening to and reading God's Word, but putting the teachings of the Bible into practice in our lives. Because James says that if you merely listen to the Bible without practicing what it teaches, you are actually deceiving yourself into believing your Christian life is all right. Please: practice the things the Bible is teaching you to do – you will be blessed and those around you will be blessed as well.

Chapter 2 of the Epistle of James discusses two important ways we put the Word of God into practice. The first is when we go beyond merely pious-sounding words and we actually help our needy brothers and sisters in practical ways. The second topic in Chapter 2 is the great issue of faith and its relation to works. Do we work for our salvation? No, certainly not. But a so-called faith that does not work is not really true faith at all, is it? True faith acts. James tells us in chapter 2 that the demons have head-knowledge about God – they know He exists – but they don't put their trust in God and obey Him. Merely acknowledging that God exists isn't saving faith. *True faith trusts in God and follows God.*

Today, we come to Chapter 3 of the book. Most of this chapter deals with a most troublesome character. The title of my sermon today is: "Watch Your Tongue!" Our tongue is a very troublesome character indeed. It can get us into so much trouble. It can do so much damage to relationships and to people's reputations and even to people's lives. Watch your tongue.

Now, let's take a look at the exhortations in James chapter 3.

Part 1: A warning to teachers.

Let's read James 3:1 – "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment."

A stricter judgment. Teachers will be more strictly judged by God than other Christians. This is really a serious thing. Teachers have influence. Teachers affect people's lives – even people's eternal destiny. It is a serious thing to stand in the pulpit and present a commentary on the Word of God, standing before people as a representative of God and expounding on the Bible and exhorting people to live by scriptural standards. Not only preachers in the pulpit, but to a lesser degree Bible Study leaders and Sunday School teachers also will be held accountable to God. We teachers had better be sure that we are correctly handling the Scripture. What a heavy responsibility teachers have! This is a concept that deeply impacts me: knowing that God will hold me accountable for everything I have said in the pulpit and also as the leader of a Bible Study. This is quite an intimidating thought. It is such an intimidating idea that for a long time, I was hesitant to take on a teaching role at church. I am going to be judged more strictly than other Christians in the church if I take on a teaching role. Every Christian in the church has been given different spiritual gifts to contribute something, big or small, to the ministry of the church, as 1st Corinthians 12 tells us. And every Christian has differing abilities and therefore correspondingly different responsibilities in ministry, as Jesus illustrates for us in the Parable of Talents in Matthew 25:14-30. We must each be faithful in whatever task God has called us to do with whatever abilities we have. And for Christians who have been called to be teachers of God's Word, that responsibility is especially serious. We speak on behalf of God and we influence people's ideas of God and influence what they do with their lives.

When I think of this issue, I can think of several examples of teachers who might have been mostly correct in their teachings but who sometimes went astray. One such example is one of the heroes of Christian history, Martin Luther. He was used wonderfully by God to spark the Protestant Reformation with his rediscovery and advancement of the principle of justification by faith alone, but he sometimes pushed that principle too far. For example, he so overemphasized this important truth about salvation that he said that if a Christian believer commits adultery a hundred times a day, it would not affect his or her justification because we are saved by faith and not by works. I think he seriously went overboard with his comments. I think somebody who repeatedly commits sin while claiming to know God isn't really a follower of God at all. Unfortunately, even today many professing Christians think that faith is all that is required of them. In one of my video courses that I took in seminary, theologian Douglas Moo says this: "Surely it is the case that too many Christians over the years have so emphasized their faith alone that they have been unconcerned about leading a life of righteousness and holiness."¹ An overemphasis on even a good thing can lead to undesirable consequences and, in this example, could lead to somebody being a hearer of the Word who fails to be a doer of the Word and therefore is deceiving himself into believing he is all right when, in fact, he might be unsaved. That is what James was saying in chapter 1 of his epistle.

What a teacher says has potentially great effects on a listener's life, even his or her eternal salvation. Teachers of God's Word bear a great deal of responsibility.

Let's move on to the next part of today's message...

Part 2: Watch your tongue, everyone.

The next few verses have a lot to say about how we use our tongue. Maybe this portion of the chapter continues as an exhortation to teachers. But I also think that all of us have something valuable to learn here, and these verses certainly seem like they are applicable to every one of us.

¹ Douglas J. Moo, *NT305 New Testament Theology*, Logos Mobile Education (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015). Segment 62.

Let's read James 3:2-4 – “²For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well. ³Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. ⁴Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires.”

Verse 2 again – “For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.”

There are many ways in which we human beings may stumble – morally, financially, relationally, and more. But the way in which we stumble with what we say is unique. The tongue is a small part of our body, but the things we say can have tremendous impact. A parent can have tremendous impact on his or her child's whole life, for good or for ill. My perfectionist father gave me lots of criticisms while I was growing up, which affected me greatly and it has taken me a long time to overcome feelings of inadequacy and timidity (take a look at my sermon entitled “Are You Timid?” for more on that story). Our tongue can get us into all kinds of trouble – perhaps because it's so easy to use our mouth and so easy to be careless in what we say.

In the second half of verse 2 we read an ideal situation in which perhaps someone can avoid stumbling in the things he or she says ... and such a person may be considered “perfect,” a word that usually means “mature” when you see it in English translations of the New Testament. Mature. One sign of maturity would be somebody who doesn't stumble in what he says – if he is able to control his tongue, then he can bridle his whole body ... he can keep his whole self under control. The ability to control your tongue might be considered the ultimate sign of somebody's ability to maintain self-control.

This reminds me of something Jesus said. Let's read His words in Matthew 12:34-37, which He spoke to the Pharisees – “³⁴You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. ³⁵The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil. ³⁶But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. ³⁷For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

Verse 36 again – “...Every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment.” Be careful what you say to people – God will someday hold you accountable for it.

Notice how this passage says that “... the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.” What fills your heart? Good, godly thoughts? Malicious thoughts? Criticisms of people? Hurts and disappointments that are not healed? I learned a long time ago not to harbor negative thoughts in the heart – they are poisonous and if such thoughts were to come out of my mouth, I could hurt people. I try to avoid that. It would be good to fill your heart with good, godly thoughts.

Philippians 4:8 has long been special to me. In that verse, the Apostle Paul says – “Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.”

Dwell on these things. Let your mind dwell on: whatever is true, honorable, right, and pure, etc. Jesus says that whatever good treasure you have inside your heart will come out in your speech, and I have sought to fill my mind with the positive thoughts in Philippians 4:8.

Well, let us return to James 3:2-4. If we can keep our tongue under control, we can keep our whole self under control. In many ways, that small guy, the tongue, leads us in one direction or another. James gives us several illustrations to show how a very small thing can direct very big objects. In verse 3 he says, “Now if we put the bits into the horses’ mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well.” In verse 4 he says, “Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires.”

That small bit in the horse’s mouth allows us to direct the horse. The small rudder of a ship allows the pilot to steer that great vessel toward the way he wants it to go. If we can keep our tongue under control, we guide the direction of our whole self, and therefore the direction of our whole life.

James continues with his illustrations. Verses 5-6 – “⁵So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! ⁶And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell.”

Here, the tongue is compared to a fire. A tiny flame can set a whole forest on fire. How many forest fires have been created by just a cigarette that was carelessly tossed away? A great many fires, I have been told. Verse 6 tells us that *the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity* and this small guy can *defile our entire body*, and even the forces of hell can get you to use your tongue in destructive ways. What a firestorm our tongue can create!

Part 3: No one can tame tongue – it is a restless evil.

I wanted to entitle this section “Tame your tongue – it is a restless evil.” But James says plainly that no one can tame it. Not completely. But we do need to curb its potential to wreak havoc in our lives.

James 3:7-8 – “⁷For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. ⁸But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.” We can tame all kinds of animals. Even if we can’t tame all of them, we certainly have been able to put them on display in zoos and aquariums, and some can even perform in circuses. We can tame wild animals, but this wild beast in our mouths we cannot tame. It is a restless evil. Restless – sometimes, we just let our tongues go wild and destroy relationships and reputations.

Verses 8-10 – “⁸But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. ⁹With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; ¹⁰from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.”

My brothers and sisters, these things ought not to be this way!

Sometimes we go to church and we act in proper Christian ways, but soon after the service is over, there may be some criticisms made about someone or there is some kind of bickering over something. Every one of our fellow human beings has been made in the likeness of God – how can you speak viciously about a brother or sister? Show some humility – please remember that you, too, are imperfect.

Verses 11-12 – “¹¹Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water?

¹²Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.” James gives us some more illustrations. These are interesting. A fountain doesn’t both produce fresh water and bitter water. A fig tree doesn’t produce a fruit other than figs, does it? Salt water can’t produce fresh water. So, our mouth ought not spout nice words one minute and ugly

words the next. That is inconsistent ... that is not the way things ought to be. We should be building up our Christian brothers and sisters with our words, not tearing them down.

Part 4: Wisdom vs. Arrogance

In the Scripture reading before I began my sermon, I only had verses 1-12 read out for you. I wanted you to have this matter of the tongue to be fresh in your mind when I started today's message, because most of this chapter deals with that troublesome character. But now I would like to read out the remaining verses of chapter 3. You will see that the topic in these verses is related to the problems we have with our speech.

James 3:13-18 – ¹³Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. ¹⁴But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. ¹⁵This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. ¹⁶For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. ¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. ¹⁸And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace."

Are you wise? Are you understanding? Maybe I fall short of these ideals, but I still seek to be instructed by verse 13 and live by good behavior, with deeds done in the gentleness of wisdom. That phrase intrigues me: deeds done in the gentleness of wisdom. The New International Version renders this phrase this way: "deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom." True wisdom leads to good behavior that is marked by humility and gentleness.

Theologian Douglas Moo has this to say in his commentary on the epistle of James:

For James assesses these people's claim to wisdom not in theological terms—how much doctrine do they know, how many Greek verbs can they parse—but in practical terms: *Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.* ... The "let him show" challenge reminds us of James's challenge in 2:18 to the "believer" who thinks works and faith can be separated: "Show me your faith without deeds [and I will show you my faith by my deeds]." Indeed, the test of true wisdom that James applies here picks up key ideas he touches on earlier in the letter: the importance of humility (1:21) and good works (2:14–26). "Good conduct," James insists, is the basis on which one can demonstrate wisdom. ... It is our acts of obedience to God, performed consistently day after day, that make up the "good conduct" of the wise person.²

James goes on to describe the opposite of deeds done in the gentleness of wisdom in verses 14-15 – ¹⁴But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. ¹⁵This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic."

There is a godly, heavenly wisdom, and there is an earth-bound, demonic wisdom. God has given Christians the Holy Spirit to renew our hearts and to lead us to godly behavior. But we often fall into our old habits, thinking thoughts that originate from this fallen world, from our fallen nature, often energized and seduced by Satan's deceptions. What is in your heart? Is there bitter jealousy there? Selfish ambition? If it is those things that fill your heart, don't try to pretend they are not there – if you do, James says you lie against the truth and that is the height of arrogance.

I entitled Part 4 of this sermon "Wisdom vs. Arrogance." We must be honest with our hearts, fill our hearts with good things, with the wisdom that comes from God, and be led by the Holy Spirit. If

² Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2000), 169–170.

we choose the other path, we choose the way of earthly, natural reasoning, even the way of Satan. Remember, the devil was the one who spoke through the serpent and prompted Adam and Eve to rebel against God. In John 8:44, Jesus said this to the Jews who opposed Him: “You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” Verse 47: “He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God.” Let us be those who choose to hear the words of God, who follow the heavenly wisdom as found in the pages of Scripture.

James 3:17-18 – “¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. ¹⁸And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”

The wisdom from above is first **pure** – that means holy, set apart from sin, free from defilement. Next, it is **peaceable** – it seeks peace with God and peace with our fellow man. It is **gentle** – this word carries with it the idea of moderation without compromise, gentleness without weakness. This wisdom is **reasonable** – this is a willingness to listen, think, pray, and obey whatever God reveals. The wisdom from above is **full of mercy ... full of good fruits ... unwavering** in conviction ... and **without hypocrisy** (the person is honest and sincere – he or she has integrity). And the resulting fruit, says verse 18, is **righteousness**, which is “sown in peace by those who make peace.”

One of my favorite pieces of ancient wisdom that I heard while I was studying the ancient church was this old slogan: *We are to lead a life of peace and repentance*. Lead a life of **peace** and **repentance**. Indeed, we could boil down Christian living to these two principles: **peace** with God and peace with our fellow human beings, coupled with **repentance** from anything that separates us from God and separates us from our fellow human beings. *Let us live lives of peace and repentance*.