

The Teacher, the Tongue, and Two Kinds of Wisdom

James 3
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Remember that the theme of the book of James is that authentic faith is demonstrable. If Christ is really Lord, then the marks of his lordship will appear in our lives. That is the emphasis of this little epistle. I am sure you flinch, as I do, as you read it. James shows us what we are really like. He says that the word of God is like a mirror. When you look in a mirror you see reality. That is why some of us avoid mirrors. We like to perpetuate the myth that what we would see there is not real. But James won't permit that. He keeps making us face reality. His purpose is redemptive. He not only shows us what is wrong with our lives but also shows us how to change and to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ.

As a reminder of the character of this man I want to share with you the comments of a second century author named Hegesippus:

James, the brother of our Lord, as there were many with his name, was surnamed "the Just" by all from the days of our Lord until now. He received the government of the church with the apostles. He drank neither wine nor strong drink and abstained from animal food and a razor never came upon his head. He never wore woolen but only fine linen garments. He was in the habit of entering into the temple alone and was often found upon his bended knees asking for the forgiveness of the people so that his knees became hard like a camel's knees as the consequence of his habitual supplication and kneeling before God.

In chapter 3 James turns his attention to teachers. He introduces his subject in this way:

Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment.

It is strange that James would so discourage teachers. A teaching ministry is the backbone and strength of any vital church. There must be accurate exposition of Scripture. The need is just as great today as it was in James' day. Therefore, James could not possibly be prohibiting people from exercising the spiritual gift of teaching. Rather, he is cautioning teachers against rushing into a ministry of teaching without weighing the responsibilities of the teaching office. Teachers will incur a stricter judgment.

This, of course, is not any reference to final judgment. All of us who are in Christ have already been declared righteous and justified in him. James is speaking, rather, of the discipline that a father metes out to a son. Teachers will be disciplined by a much stricter standard. The rest of the chapter is an explanation of why this is so.

He argues this way: There are two methods by which teachers teach -- exhortation and example. Both are

essential. We teach by what we say. We teach by what we are. And yet, James says, we are prone to sin in both these areas. Therefore, we ought to weigh carefully the responsibilities involved in teaching. Verses 2 through 12 deal with the problem of the tongue, verses 13 through 18 with the problem of the example of our life.

With respect to the tongue I think we can all identify with what James says. I sometimes feel as if I were born with a silver foot in my mouth.

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.

Do you understand what he is saying? If you can bridle your tongue, you can bridle your whole body. The tongue, you see indicates where we are spiritually. If a man is mature, he can bridle his tongue. If he cannot control his tongue, he is not mature. It is just that simple!

The last time I went to a physician for a checkup one of the first things he asked me to do was to stick out my tongue. Evidently there is something about the condition of the tongue that indicates one's internal condition, reveals the state of health. James says that this is true in the spiritual realm as well. If you want to see where a person is spiritual just look at his tongue. That is the indication of his spiritual health. Now, that is simply devastating when you think about it! We can prolong to some extent the myth that we are mature. But then the tongue tips us, and others, off to where we really are.

Let me describe how this happens to me. There are certain people who bring out the very worst in me. I fancy that I am really a nice person. But there are certain people whose actions cause me to react adversely. They bring out the hostility and the irritability and I say harsh, angry things in reaction. If I didn't have to be around them, *then* I could be my gracious self, you see. But in actuality all they are doing is bringing out what is really within me. That is the true me and my tongue lets everyone know my true condition. It constantly betrays me.

Verses 3 through 5 give three illustrations by which James conveys the importance of the tongue:

Now if we put the bits into the horse's mouths so that they may obey us, we direct their entire body as well. Behold, 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. So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. Behold, how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!

A small piece of metal enables us to control a very powerful beast. A great merchant ship driven by strong winds can be controlled by the helmsman with a simple movement of the rudder. An enormous forest fire can be ignited by a carelessly dropped match. The point of all these illustrations seems obvious. Little things mean a lot. Something small can be devastating in its effects.

A friend of mine was riding on his motorcycle on an expressway in Dallas, Texas, when a bug flew into his mouth. He was so startled that he lost control of his bike and ran into the concrete support of an overpass. He spent the next six months in traction. Fortunately he recovered completely. But he learned the lesson that little things can have a great impact upon your life.

Have you learned that lesson? The tongue is just a small member but it can do awesome things. It can devastate entire areas of life and, like a forest fire it may do damage that takes years to repair. A hasty word can destroy a reputation or can undermine someone's confidence in a brother. Whole nations have been deceived and inflamed by a few contrived words. The tongue is but a small part of the body yet it boasts of great things, it has great

potential for evil. Of course it also has great potential for good. A word can encourage and build and support. It can radically change a person's life for good. There is great potential in the tongue either for good or evil. Verse 6 seems to expand upon this idea. It describes the far-reaching effects of the tongue:

And 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.

James says that the tongue is the very world of iniquity. I believe he means that it can express every sort of evil in the world. Malice, greed, anger, lust, wrath, resentment, jealousy, bitterness--all these vices somehow find their expression through it. The tongue suggests and condones sin. You can hardly think of any sin that isn't somehow expressed through it.

It sets on fire the course of our life. We are troubled by our tongue from the cradle to the grave. From the minute we learn to talk until we die it is a problem. It doesn't cease to be a problem because we have grown older. It sets on fire the entire course of our life.

And, James says, it is set on fire by hell. James word for hell is not the one ordinarily used in the New Testament. It is, however, the word that Jesus most often used. It is the word "Gehenna." Gehenna was a geographical location. It was the valley of Hinnom, located to the southeast of Jerusalem. This was the garbage dump where all the filth from the city accumulated. How descriptive. The tongue is activated by a sort of cosmic garbage dump. How grim. But the picture becomes yet more bleak:

For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed, and has been tamed by the human race. But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.

The tongue is utterly incorrigible. Can you control your tongue? Our experience is very much like that which David describes in Psalm 39. He says that he wanted to seal his lips. But the fire burned within and he spoke. Have you ever had that experience? Have you determined that you would keep silent and would not flare up or give way to rage . . . only to wind up doing that very thing? "No one can tame the tongue."

At the very time the picture appears to be getting darker and darker there is the first glimmer of light. James's point is that no man can tame the tongue. Men can tame every animal but no man can tame the tongue. However, there is the suggestion here that there may be help from another source. In verses 9 through 12 James describes the baffling, incongruous conduct of the tongue:

With it we bless our Lord and Father; and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.

How can we bless God at one moment and then curse men, made in God's image, in the next? Or how can we bless men and curse God? Why do we immediately damn God when we are injured or frustrated? How can you explain this strange behavior? James continues:

Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? Can a fig tree, my brethren produce olives, or a vine produces figs? Neither can salt water produce fresh.

Why is it that one minute we can speak gracious, loving words to our wives and the next minute cut them down? Why do we speak gently to our children one minute and the next minute with harshness? Why do we say things that hurt those we love most of all? Why?

The illustrations that James uses give us the clue. If you saw a fountain that produced brackish water one minute and fresh water the next it ought to occur to you that there are two sources of supply. And if you saw a fig tree that produced olives you would suspect that the tree is not true to its nature. Do you see what James is saying?

There are two sources of control in us and the tongue simply expresses which source is in control. On the one hand there is the spirit of Jesus Christ dwelling in us. That is our new nature. That is our *true* nature. And when the resurrected Lord is in control of our life the result is words that are edifying, encouraging, uplifting.

But there is another source, the flesh, the life that we inherited from Adam. And when the flesh is in control the result is bitterness and cursing and strife and malice and anger. James is saying that when cursing comes out of our mouths we are not being true to our true nature. We are simply giving evidence of the fact that the old life, the flesh, is in control. If we want our tongues to be right, then the inner man must be under the control of Jesus Christ. He has to be Lord. Jesus said, "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." Whatever fills our heart inevitably comes out.

Let me illustrate. I believe that our damning of God comes from resentment that we store up in our heart against him. Perhaps we resent the way he has made us, or the particular circumstances we are in or a trial we are undergoing. We get bitter and resentful and let the flesh have its fling. If we don't judge that bitterness, sooner or later out of our mouth comes a damnation of God because that is really the way we feel inside. Similarly, our lewd and filthy speech comes from unjudged lustful thoughts. Do you see? How can we expect fresh water, James says, to come from a bitter, brackish source?

I recently encountered an expression in the Psalms that struck me forcefully. David says, "Lord, teach me to speak the truth in my heart." It dawned on me that the secret of speaking the truth with our lips is to speak the truth in our heart. Have you ever done something wrong and concocted an elaborate lie to protect yourself? Perhaps you never really intended to tell it but when you were under pressure the lie came out. David realized that if you speak the truth in your mind, i.e., deal with the lie in your mind, it will never get out of your mouth. Consider another example. If we feel we can't accept ourselves the way that God made us, we are apt to daydream and fantasize and try to live in a make-believe world. Then when someone tries to get to know us, what do you know, we speak these fantasies as though they were realities because we have lied to ourselves in our heart. And our phoniness is soon apparent.

Do you see how this principle works? James is saying that if you want to deal with the tongue you must start with the heart. The Lord has to control the inner man. Only fresh sources can produce fresh water, and that corresponds to the life of Jesus Christ within us.

In the last section of the chapter, from verse 13 on, James turns to a consideration of two kinds of wisdom:

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

James asks the rhetorical question, who among you teachers is wise and understanding? I am sure that all the

teachers jumped to their feet and said, "We are." James says, "All right if you are really wise your wisdom will be exhibited in two ways." The first is obedience to the truth. Knowledge in itself means very little. In fact it may only harden your heart. But God has ordained that knowledge responded to results in further evaluation of truth. We grow in wisdom by obeying the truth that God reveals. When, we respond he gives us more and greater truth. Proverbs says: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." True wisdom, then, grows out of our obedience. Thus our authority to teach or to communicate the truth to others in any way is not the product of our intelligence or education. No, it grows out of our obedience of the truth.

The second mark of true wisdom is gentleness. That is a great expression -- "gentleness of wisdom." The truly wise man does not bludgeon people with the truth. He, is not harsh or brash. He is gentle. In his second letter to him Paul says to Timothy, "The servant of God must not strive but be gentle with all men . . . patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves . . . "

Almost every quarter we have college students who find the Lord and then determine to go back home and set their parents straight about the gospel. But we caution them rather to go back and submit to their parents' authority and to be an obedient son or daughter and to walk with the Lord and wait for God to open the door of opportunity for a gentler loving explanation of the change in their life. People respond to *gentle* wisdom. The truly wise man then is obedient to the truth and has a gentle spirit.

But jealousy and selfish ambition, on the other hand, are lies told against the truth. This wisdom, James says, is earthly in its limit and scope, i.e., it sees things solely from a worldly standpoint. It is natural (or soulish) and it is demonic. This is in line with what he says in chapter 2. The demons know the truth but it doesn't change them. They never lose their demonic character. So James concludes that we may know much truth but if we are not responding to it we are as demonic as the demons in hell. Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every vile practice.

James says that wisdom from above, by contrast, is pure. It is peaceable, gentle, and reasonable. It doesn't insist upon its own way, but instead is teachable. It is full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, and without hypocrisy. "And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace." That is, the person characterized by this type of wisdom sows a harvest of righteousness and peace everywhere he goes. He heals and reconciles. He has a redemptive kind of ministry.

Now that we have analyzed it let's try to put this passage back together again. James says that we should not seek to be teachers without realizing that we will receive a greater judgment because in the two means, by which we teach, our words and our life, we are prone to failure. The only power that will lift us out of that failure is the resurrection life of Jesus Christ. His life is in us to deal with the old life and to bring it under his authority. The result will be words and a life that produce righteousness and peace. My heart really responds to that and I know that yours does too. That is the kind of life that we want. And God wants to give it to us.

Father, we thank you again for the grace that is ours in Christ Jesus. Thank you for your power to deal with the things in the inner man that corrupt and defile our speech and our life. Thank you for the wisdom that is from above and for the fact that we may lay hold of your power to be obedient to the truth you have taught us. We pray in Christ's name, Amen.

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