

James 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] James chapter 3. Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at ships also, though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed, and has been tamed by mankind. But no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.

My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives? Or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly and spiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. Concern for speech and the tongue is pervasive in the wisdom material in scripture, and unsurprisingly for a book that works so much within that tradition, it is discussed by James at length in chapter 3. This concern for the tongue is already present in

James chapter 1 verses 19 to 20. Know this, my beloved brothers. Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

And again in verse 26 of that chapter, if anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue, but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. He begins the chapter with a warning against desiring to become a teacher. The teacher is charged with a task of judgment that means that they must open themselves up to a greater judgment. As Jesus teaches in Matthew chapter 7 verse 2 in the Sermon on the Mount, for with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. The person who's the teacher is charged to engage in acts of judgment, and so they must assume this greater responsibility to be judged themselves. Beyond this, they also have a responsibility for the spiritual well-being of those committed to their charge.

The teaching that they give will have an influence upon people's lives. We might here consider the way that Jesus particularly focuses upon the religious teachers of his time. He challenges them for their unfaithfulness, and the way that they lead others astray, the way that they bind heavy burdens upon people, the way that their pride, love of money, and love of the praise of men leads them to adulterate the word of God, to substitute their traditions for the word of God, and the way that their hypocrisy means that the judgment they mete out to others is not something that they apply to themselves. James is very much thinking along the same lines. The teacher works with his tongue, but the tongue is a treacherous tool. The person who has mastered their tongue is a perfect and mature person. If you can master your tongue, you can master every single part of your life. We

might consider here the importance that the tongue has for the prophet. When prophets are called in scripture, often what is particularly focused upon is the preparation of their mouth for speech, the way in which halting mouths are equipped to speak, the way in which unclean lips are purified, the way in which tongues are made glad and kindled with a spiritual fire. The bit in the mouth of the horse and the rudder on the ship both illustrate the power of a little thing to control bodies much greater than themselves.

[4 : 50] The images here are ones of control. The person who controls their tongue can control their entire life or an entire body of people. Tongues can be controlled, of course, for good and for evil.

Carefully chosen words can be things that move great nations and their outcomes. We might think about the serpent's temptation of Eve, the way in which he cunningly insinuates that God is one who is withholding. We might also think of Hushai the Archite's counsel, his brilliant and shrewd use of words to get Absalom to reject the counsel of Ahithophel and to buy David a window of time to regroup. The person who masters their words can work wonders. They can persuade people, they can emotionally move people, they can instruct people in the truth. The tongue can legitimately boast of great things then. It is a most powerful instrument indeed. However, the tongue is a cause of destruction.

Now we turn from images of control to an image of a destructive power that is completely out of control, the small spark that starts a forest fire. Such an image of the tongue as a flame is also found in places such as Proverbs chapter 16 verse 27. A worthless man plots evil and his speech is like a scorching fire. The tongue is a world of unrighteousness. This is maybe similar to what Jesus teaches in Matthew chapter 15 verses 10 to 11 and 16 to 19. And he called the people to him and said to them, Hear and understand, it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a person. And he said, Are you also still without understanding?

Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. The tongue is a small piece of flesh, and yet it stains the whole body. It inflames all of our existence. In Ephesians chapter 4 verse 29, Paul speaks of corrupting speech. The tongue is something that can spread a sort of rottenness within us and within our communities. A connection between the tongue and fire is not restricted to the negative imagery of the tongue that brings destruction and death in the service of Satan. The tongue might also be set on fire from heaven. The word of the Lord is spoken of as akin to fire in Jeremiah chapter 23 verse 29. In 2 Samuel chapter 22 verse 9, devouring fire is said to come forth from the Lord's mouth. In Isaiah chapter 30 verse 27, the Lord's tongue is compared to a consuming fire. And the incendiary character of the words of the prophet is a recurring theme in scripture. The word of the Lord is as fire, and fire proceeds from the Lord's mouth when he speaks. As organs of the Lord's speech, the prophets also have their mouths empowered and purified by divine fire. The Lord tells the prophet Jeremiah that he has made his words on Jeremiah's mouth fire in Jeremiah chapter 5 verse 14.

In Revelation chapter 11 verse 5, fire proceeds from the mouths of the prophetic witnesses. The employment of the image of fire in order to describe the relationship between the prophet and the word and the spirit of God is quite appropriate. The prophet is animated by a power that originates outside of himself, exceeds his own strength, as we see in Jeremiah chapter 20 verse 9, and is driven by a will to which his own will must be conformed. The prophet must also faithfully fulfil his duty, lest his spirit-given power be extinguished. Recognising this, we might see the tongue as something that will either bear the flames of hell, bring destruction and death, or it will be kindled with the fire of heaven. In Isaiah chapter 6 verses 6 to 7, one of the seraphim touches the lips of the prophet Isaiah with a live coal, purifying his lips for future witness. We see a similar thing in Acts chapter 2 on the day of Pentecost, as tongues of flame come upon the heads of each of the disciples.

[9 : 10] These tongues are connected with the tongues with which they speak. Their tongues are kindled so that they can bear the divine word. However, in James, the tongues are not set on fire from heaven, but set on fire from hell. Whether cursing, the spreading of rumours, angry outbursts, lies or other falsehoods and deceptions, flattery, boasting, coarse speech, blasphemy, or any number of other things, the tongue spreads corruption and destruction. Men are unable to tame the

tongue. The tongue is something that has a sort of a will of its own. The fool is defined by his tongue in the book of Proverbs. His tongue and his mouth operate as if by their own accord. He breathes out lies. He speaks lies not because he has planned or deliberated about them, but just because he is ruled by lies. Lies just come forth naturally from him. His tongue is a rod for his own back. He says things, not knowing what he's saying, and ends up suffering the consequences. His tongue brings death. His tongue is a fire that gives off sparks that ignite great conflagrations of conflict within communities, and which burn up his own life. James challenges inconsistency and doubleness throughout his epistle, and the tongue is characterized by just this. The same tongues that bear God's name in worship can also bear foul language and hateful speech. The tongue is found at the opening of the mouth, and it is at the mouth that that which is within proceeds forth. It is at the mouth, the spring of the person, that the true character of what lies within is betrayed. Jesus teaches much the same. By their fruit you will know them. Our mouths display the fruit of our hearts. One of the best ways to understand a person's character is to pay close attention to the way that they speak over a long period of time. In verse 13, James asks,

Who is wise and understanding among you? It may seem as if he's turning to a very different subject here, but he's continuing many of the same themes, and I think the underlying theme is the same. It relates to the question of discerning and displaying the presence of true wisdom. How can we discern and display this?

James began the chapter by warning people against the desire to become teachers, and I think this is what marks people out as fitting teachers. Wisdom is manifested, James argues, in good works done in meekness. What is this meekness? It's a lack of pride. It's placing others ahead of ourselves. It produces good works that are characteristic of faith also. That's how you know what true wisdom is. James might be speaking to people aspiring to the office of teachers here. Jealousy and selfish ambition can so often drive such a quest. People want a platform. They want the eyes of the masses to be upon them.

They behave with the opposite of the meekness that is characteristic of true wisdom. Some people like to boast about their wisdom in a way that is false to the truth. True wisdom, however, wisdom that comes from God comes with humility. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Humility is integral to such fear. By contrast, earthly and demonic wisdom is distinctively marked by jealousy and pride, and these things produce social conflict and disorder and all sorts of sin. This is precisely not the sort of person that you want to become a teacher and a leader. However, true wisdom is utterly different.

It is characterized by purity, which is a key term for James' understanding and characterization of true religion. It is morally unstained. It will not produce evil. This is its primary trait. It is a fresh water spring, as it were, that will not give forth brackish water. James describes such wisdom in a manner that is reminiscent of Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians chapter 5, verses 22 to 23. It is peaceable. It is not given to conflict. It is not always spoiling for a fight.

[13 : 13] It is gentle and kind. It is not harsh in its treatment of others. It is open to reason. It is tractable to the truth. It is not pridefully bound up in its own opinions. It is open to being proved wrong.

It is full of mercy and good fruits. It is loving to the needy in speech and in act. It is impartial. It judges according to true judgment and not according to mere prejudice in appearance.

It is sincere, genuine and guileless. Such wisdom is perhaps above all other things, distinguished by its peacefulness. It sows in peace and it makes peace. The result is a harvest of righteousness, the whole range of practices that are pleasing to the Lord.

A question to consider. What are some of the different forms of control of tongue that the wise person can exhibit?