

# Epistle of James

## Chapter 3

### **Slow to speak: teachers and believers submitting the tongue to God's authority (3:1-18)**

1. In this section James has the teachers of God's word in direct focus, but all believers are commanded to consider how they use their tongues, and if they are properly submitted to God.
2. "Tongue" is a generic term for the words and thoughts that come out of the heart (Mat. 12:34, Pro. 18:21, Ps. 141:3-4). However, all language-based communication is in his scope.
  - a. Words spoken verbally, or the denotative use of the term tongue.
  - b. Words communicated in written form for others (pen and paper, computerized, emails, texts ...).
  - c. Words that come to mind internally but are never communicated directly to others.
3. James addresses those are now, or might desire to become, teachers/preachers. That is, those who would professionally or ministerially use words as their primary form of service to the body of Christ.
  - a. James insists that the desire to teach must be restricted to those who have a gift and calling to teach God's word of truth.
  - b. Those who do not have a Holy Spirit calling to teach, or those who are likely to abuse their calling because of personal moral failures that would lead to compromising truth should never desire to be called or to serve in the role of a teacher.
  - c. Teachers will receive a stricter judgment than those who do not teach. The words spoken by teachers have great influence in the church.
  - d. This admonition is more about source of the content proclaimed and the independent exercise of thought than it is about leading others through another teacher's material or curriculum.
    - i. Sunday School "teachers" who do not bring their own original thoughts into the classroom are likely not under this burden of stricter judgment.
    - ii. Small group leaders and facilitators are likewise not under this stricter burden if they also refrain from speaking their own thoughts about biblical truth.
    - iii. All believers are encouraged to speak words of truth to other believers.
      1. Pulling words and thoughts from Scripture, well-established biblical doctrines, or from respected teachers in the body is encouraged.
      2. Embellishment or deviation from established truths can be dangerous. Without the tools for proper interpretation.
4. Every human being will stumble in many things (all manner of sins).
5. Only a perfect man (Christ alone meets this standard) will not stumble in his speech. However, a perfect man, with control over his tongue, would certainly be able to control his whole body.
6. Power of the tongue examples 1 & 2: the power to direct large objects.
  - a. **Bridles:** humans have discovered that we can control a large, powerful animal such as a horse by putting a small and otherwise feeble object into the mouth of the animal.

- b. **Rudders:** humans have also learned that enormous and heavy ships can overcome the forces of wind, waves and current to control and direct the ship by a comparatively small rudder at the stern of the boat.
  - c. **Tongue:** this small organ has even more power and control over every person's body than bridles and rudders do over horses and ships respectively.
- 7. A person's tongue is capable of boasting about a great many things that it should not.
  - a. Boasting is always dangerous unless it is boasting about the truth of God's word such as the cross of Christ (Gal. 6:14).
  - b. Boasting can cause deception and then lead people away from Christ to their own destruction.
  - c. Boasting is sinful if the focus is on anything other than God and the powerful truth of God's word.
  - d. Boasting will almost certainly result in the one who is boasting being led away from God out of pride and arrogance.
  - e. Conclusion: this small organ has more control over our lives and circumstances than most people realize.
- 8. Power of the tongue examples 3 & 4: the power to destroy
  - a. **Fire.** The smallest spark in dry timbers can set an entire forest ablaze.
  - b. The tongue is like a forest fire.
    - i. It opens the destructive door to iniquity
    - ii. One misspoken word can defile the whole body.
    - iii. Speaking lies and deceptions can disrupt our entire walk with Christ, potentially transferring us out of the kingdom of light and into the kingdom of darkness.
    - iv. The destructive power of the tongue can lead us to "hell."
      - 1. Gk. *Gehenna*. This was a real and known place in the Valley of Hinnom south of Jerusalem.
      - 2. This valley is where actual human sacrifices were offered (Jer. 7:31).
      - 3. Gehenna was a place of continuous and unending burning of the rubbish discarded by the people of God which is why it is compared to the place of unending burning and torment for those who reject Christ.
  - c. **Beasts.** Man has been able to tame many wild and dangerous beasts such as birds, reptiles, and sea creatures.
  - d. Even though man can control many beasts through wisdom and training, he has shown no capacity for taming his own tongue and thus gaining mastery over it.
    - i. The tongue is seen as an unruly evil.
    - ii. The tongue is full of deadly and poisonous words.
    - iii. Believers seem to fail to see the irony that the same tongue we use to bless our God and Father is frequently used to curse men whom God has not cursed.
    - iv. Man is made in the image of God, and this should command enormous respect for life from conception to death, but the tongue dishonors God by dishonoring those He has made in His own image.
  - e. These things (using the power of the tongue to destroy lives) ought not ever be done by a believer who is submitted to God, but all too often is.
- 9. Power of the tongue examples 5 & 6: good waters and good fruit (or bitter waters and bad fruit)

- a. **Springs of water.** Water is a gift from God and is essential for all life.
    - i. Good or sweet water brings joy and life to the thirsty
    - ii. Bad and bitter water brings suffering and even death.
    - iii. No spring can be the source of both good and bad waters at the same time.
    - iv. Likewise, the tongue of a believer must not be used to bless and to destroy.
  - b. **Fruit producing trees and vines.** Fruit is produced by the kind of plant that produces it.
    - i. Fig trees do not produce olives.
    - ii. Grapevines do not produce figs.
  - c. Summary: the heart tells the tongue what to speak. If our tongues are the source of evil or false doctrines, then we have a problem in our heart that must be surrendered to God.
10. All six of the examples are given as a caution to teachers first, and then to all believers.
- a. The tongue is the primary tool of the teacher. Improper and uncontrolled use leads to God's strict judgment.
  - b. The tongue used for something other than teaching God's pure truth causes the teacher to stumble and to sin.
  - c. Though a small organ, the tongue can make great boasts in the flesh, especially by a false or wayward teacher.
  - d. A false teacher can set the world on fire (in a bad way) with by speaking false doctrines that lead multitudes of people away from sound biblical doctrine.
  - e. The tongue is a relentless and uncontrolled source of evil for a false teacher. The more the tongue is used to deceive, the more it compels the false teacher to further deceive.
11. Understanding the gifts and calling of a teacher.
- a. Teaching is a high and honorable calling, second only to that of prophets and apostles.
    - i. Prophets and apostles directly received God's truth.
    - ii. Teachers receive truth from the prophets and apostles (and the Holy Spirit). They then must faithfully teach the word of truth without compromise, corruption, or error (1 Cor. 12:28, Eph. 4:11).
    - iii. Scripture is not always easy to understand (2 Pet. 3:16), but teachers are called to explain God's truths without bringing in their own conflicting biases.
  - b. Teachers who have been called/gifted by God should not fear to do their calling in submission to God's authority.
    - i. God has not gifted everyone to teach, but those who are called must faithfully serve with integrity and humility.
    - ii. Teaching carries a great responsibility, and it comes with the promise of condemnation if done incorrectly.
    - iii. Those not called to teach should therefore treat the office of a teacher with dignity and respect when they observe it being done properly and with humility.
12. Slow to speak; respond in meekness with wisdom from above (demonic wisdom is condemned).
- a. Godly wisdom attributes that qualify the teacher.
    - i. Good conduct
    - ii. All works and words spoken are done in meekness
    - iii. They are pure
    - iv. They are peaceable

- v. They are gentle
  - vi. They are willing to yield to the proper authority of God's word, not that of men
  - vii. They are full of mercy
  - viii. They produce good fruits
  - ix. They show no partiality
  - x. All things are done without hypocrisy
  - xi. They produce the fruit of true righteousness
  - xii. Teaching and speaking are sown in peace with a desire for peace.
- b. Demonic wisdom attributes:
- i. Bitter envy
  - ii. Self-seeking in the heart
  - iii. Boastful
  - iv. Speaking lies against the truth
  - v. Earthly focused
  - vi. Sensual
  - vii. Demonic
  - viii. Engenders confusion
  - ix. A person who dwells in the midst of evil.
13. Improper use of the tongue (words spoken in an ungodly manner) is especially dangerous for pastors/teachers because their tongue is the primary tool used in their vocation.
14. Twisting and distorting biblical truth for personal gain is one of the greatest temptations that confronts all teachers. Doing so seems to hold the promise of:
- a. Achieving greater prosperity
  - b. Achieving greater popularity
  - c. Gaining acceptance by the world that hates God's truths
  - d. Achieving a higher level of self-satisfaction (pride and arrogance).
15. Any willingness to twist and distort biblical truth opens the floodgates to all manner of sin and perversion for the teacher and for those receiving the teaching.