

The Believer and the Tongue

James 3

Overview – Power of the Tongue: *James 3:1-12*

Stern Warning

James had previously dealt with the issue of faith without works (James 2:18). He warned of those that boasted of their faith while providing no evidence to support it, being filled with words but lacking in works. People of this sort are more interested in speaking than hearing, and teaching than learning. It may be that many were looking to teach without displaying evidence of a changed life (Romans 2:17-23). They professed to be saved but their conduct said otherwise. This is important because the most dangerous teachers are the ones with dead faith. Their words will be influenced by worldly logic instead of God's word (Colossians 2:8). Irreparable damage has been done due to unfit and unprepared teachers. It is better to have a few qualified teachers than many unqualified ones. Teaching is a great responsibility and should not be taken lightly.

Standing before others and delivering a spiritual lesson can be a blessing or a burden, depending upon the words that are spoken. To offend means to err, stumble, or fall. Since all are susceptible to slipping into error, teachers should choose their words carefully. It only takes one word to produce a problem. It is clearly stated that the man that does not offend in word is perfect, or mature, and has control over his body. Since James just pointed out that all stumble and fall a times, it is evident he is talking about maturity not sinless perfection. When the tongue is bridled, the other members of the body are easily restrained. "He who truly masters his words, will also master his works."¹ We see that it is important for teachers to have evidence of true faith, heard in their words and seen in their conduct.

Strength of Words

James provided some examples of the tongue's power. He compared it to the bit that is found in the horse's mouth. Though it is a small piece, the bit enables the rider to overcome the wild nature of the horse. The powerful animal will obey directions given through the bit and will go wherever the rider chooses. When under control the horse is a great benefit. The next comparison for the tongue was to the ship's helm, which remains unseen and is easily overlooked. Ships are large powerful vessels that sail in the sea, often at the direction of the wind and waves. At first glance they appear to be impossible for men to control but the helm allows the pilot to guide the ship. Often, the horse and ship are more obedient than men and women. The horse obeys the rider and the ship follows the guidance of the helmsman, while believers continue to gratify their flesh instead of yielding to the Lord (Romans 6:13). We find that the tongue must be bridled or else it will be troublesome like a wild horse or wayward ship (Psalm 39:1).

Chapter Outline

I. Power of the Tongue: *James 3:1-12*

A. Stern Warning: *James 3:1-2*

B. Strength of Words: *James 3:3-12*

II. Power over the Tongue: *James 3:13-18*

A. Temporal Wisdom: *James 3:13-16*

B. True Wisdom: *James 3:17-18*

¹ John Lange, "Lange's Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: James and Jude," (Michigan: Zondervan, 1950) p. 94.

The arrogant tongue is good at making grand proclamations. Often our words do not even come close to backing up our boastful words. We talk of doing this or that only to forget or neglect our promises. James compared the tongue to fire. When controlled fire is invaluable. It produces warmth, provides ability to cook food, and power to operate machinery. However, fire can become uncontrollable in a matter of seconds and the damage can be devastating. Likewise the tongue, which can be used for good, is able to rapidly produce extensive damage. Controlled words can give way to passionate outbursts that leave a trail of destruction. It is impossible to number the problems the tongue has caused. The unruly tongue is straight out of hell. It represents wickedness and follows the example of the devil; who is constantly deceiving or blasting others (Revelation 12:10). Like a fire, the tongue can be used for good or bad and is often a moment away from causing great harm.

The tongue is so powerful it cannot be tamed. Men have succeeded in capturing and taming all kinds of wild animals, catching the fiercest predators and placing them on display. Yet, no man has been able to subdue the tongue. At times, men and women may exercise control over the tongue but they will never tame it. Their self-control will soon give way to boisterous tantrums or subtle insults. It is impossible to have complete control over our tongue, not to mention the tongues of others. The Lord alone is able to regulate our tongue when we yield our bodies to Him (Romans 12:1-2).

*"Sinful man is able to raise himself above every other irrational creature but he is unable to raise himself above his own nature."
John Lange*

The tongue is extremely dangerous, described as being unruly and full of deadly poison (Psalm 140:3; Romans 3:13). It is similar to wild creatures that are handled with great caution. With the tongue men bless God then turn around and curse others (Proverbs 15:1). They deceptively say one thing but mean another. The tongue is so wickedly hypocritical there is nothing in nature that compares. Fountains do not produce bitter and sweet water but remain consistent. Also, trees and vines produce like kind. It should be the same with our tongue. An inconsistent tongue indicates a spiritual problem that needs to be addressed (Matthew 15:18). Either one is without Christ or wrongly acting in the flesh. Whatever the case, only with the power of God can we control our tongue (Philippians 4:13).

Overview – Power over the Tongue: *James 3:13-18*

Temporal Wisdom

James offered a challenge to the Jewish believers. Who is a wise man? A wise man knows God and lives to please Him (Proverbs 14:16). Who is endowed with knowledge? A knowledgeable man has true information to impart (Proverbs 1:5-7, 2:5-6). These questions may have been directed at those that aspired to be teachers. To be qualified requires more than desire and the ability to speak well. It calls for both knowledge and wisdom, which will be evident in one's conduct. Works will be performed in meekness with wisdom, not an arrogant boastful spirit. A person with true wisdom and meekness will talk and live correctly. Their teachings will be backed up with their actions providing proof of a changed life.

The problem is that many possess worldly wisdom instead of wisdom from God. This so-called wisdom has three main characteristics. First it is earthly and found in this world (1 Corinthians 1:20-21). It is the product of a sinful nature so it will always fall short and come up empty. Remember, knowledge and wisdom are different. Knowledge is the accumulation of information and wisdom is the ability to use the information correctly. There is nothing wrong with knowledge the world has but the wisdom it offers is lacking. What men and women discover is often viewed in light of worldly wisdom instead of God's word so their conclusions are made without any consideration of the Lord. All is based upon a humanistic mindset and if something does not conform it is rejected. Next we are told that it is sensual, from the flesh. Because it is natural, from the mind of one with a sinful nature, it often leads to self-conceit. This wisdom focuses on what gratifies the individual. Finally, it is devilish, from the devil and demons. The devil is the great deceiver so his wisdom will be dangerous and destructive. Since it must be referred to as wisdom, it is called wisdom from below. Being inferior to what God has to offer it causes bitter envying and strife. Worldly wisdom results in a jealous spirit that leads to confusion and every evil work. Instead of finding true wisdom and peace, one ends up with more problems. Sadly, this faulty wisdom is being promoted in churches and practiced amongst believers. Instead of growing closer to God many are being filled with worldly logic and reasoning.

True Wisdom

Contrary to earthly wisdom, true wisdom is from above. Its source is God so it is not tainted with things of this world – pride, envy, strife, lust etc. Instead it results in a life that is pleasing to the Lord. The first characteristic of true wisdom has nothing to do with the intellect but the heart. God's wisdom is pure and results in a humble life. Since it is pure, true wisdom demands separation from the world (2 Corinthians 7:1). It is also peaceful and gentle. A person with true wisdom is patient, polite, and proper. This wisdom from above makes one easy to be intreated, implying they are open-minded, willing to listen, easy to get along with and a pleasure to be around. True wisdom is merciful and produces good fruits. There will be evidence of God's wisdom when it is present. Finally, those with true wisdom are impartial and without hypocrisy. Others are treated fairly and nothing is hidden because there is nothing to hide. Only God is able to provide this type of wisdom.

The product of true wisdom is the fruit of righteousness, which results in peace. Remember, the wisdom of the world leads to strife and envying, whereas wisdom from God is peaceful. Those with wisdom from above will be a blessing to others. Their conduct will promote peace instead of causing strife or sowing discord (Proverbs 6:16-19). Like the farmer that sows the seed in peace, the believer will also live without producing problems. It is God's wisdom that enables believers to exercise control over their tongue.

The Believer's Life

They are born from above. *John 3:1-7*

Their Father is in Heaven. *Matthew 6:9*

Their wisdom is from above. *James 3:17*

Their citizenship is in Heaven. *Philippians 3:20*

Their home is in Heaven. *John 14:1-6*

Their treasures are in Heaven. *Matthew 6:19*

Their hope is in Heaven. *Colossians 3:1-4*

Questions for Consideration

Why is it important to have qualified teachers?

What illustrations does James use concerning the tongue?

Is it possible for the tongue to be tamed?

What are some of the things an unruly tongue can do?

What are the evidences of false wisdom?

Why is the world's wisdom dangerous?

Where does true wisdom come from?

What are some of the characteristics of true wisdom?

What does true wisdom produce?

How can you have true wisdom?

Points to Ponder

How powerful are words?

With words we are able to influence others with encouragement or discouragement. A single word can lift a person up or destroy their character. With only one word careers have begun and ended – hired or fired.

What do your words say?

Your words reveal your heart. Good words give the impression of a righteous man, while filthy words give the impression of a wicked man. Our speech tells others who we are, it gives us away, whether we belong to God or not. So consider your words.

What is an inconsistent tongue?

It is a hypocritical tongue because it provides both blessings and curses. It says one thing but means another and talks nice to the face but vile when the back is turned. It is also found encouraging and then soon after gossiping.

What is the danger of earthly wisdom?

It comes from a world tainted by sin and filled with sinners. Because of this, it promotes and exalts sinful men instead of God. It leads to self-conceit, which is seen in much of our art, music, books, and other forms of entertainment.

How does one attain true wisdom?

God provides wisdom unto those that ask for it. However, we must have faith in order to receive it. If we are without true wisdom, it is because we failed to ask or were lacking in faith. If you desire wisdom, simply trust in God and ask.