

James chapter 3

The trouble with the tongue (verses 1-12)

James begins chapter 3 with his favorite term for his readers, “My brethren”. Before launching into a fascinating discussion of the trouble with the tongue, James briefly discusses the office of “teacher” within the church. He warns that “not many” should become teachers since teachers will “receive a stricter judgment”.

Paul stated that God has appointed teachers in the church along with other offices, but also pointed out that not everyone had been appointed to this office (1 Corinthians 12:28-29). He stated in Ephesians 4:11-12, that God had given the office of teacher, among other offices, “for the equipping of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ”. The writer of the book of Hebrews chastised some of his readers by pointing out that they should have become teachers by a certain time, not remaining babes in Christ (Hebrews 5:12-14).

From these passages we can see the importance of the office of teacher within local congregations of the Body of Christ. Yet, James warns against a multiplication of teachers because they are subject to a stricter judgment. This is in keeping with the teaching of Jesus in Luke 12:47-48, “to whom much is given, from him much will be required”. When Jesus spoke with Nicodemus concerning the essentiality of the new birth, Nicodemus did not understand. Jesus was surprised at his lack of understanding and asked, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?” (John 3:9-10).

It is a serious responsibility to teach other Christians. Some congregations of the Lord’s church practice what is known as “mutual edification” where each male member

of the congregation is expected to take a turn teaching the other members. This seems to be what James was warning against. Those within the congregation who have been given the ability to teach by God should be the ones entrusted to do so. In this way the congregation can be edified.

Beginning with verse 2 James begins a classic discussion on the sins of the tongue. He points out that no Christian is perfect, “we all stumble in many things”. Then he states that if we were able to control our tongues we would be “perfect”. Jesus explained that the tongue reveals the innermost wants of the heart (Matthew 12:33-37). All Christians understand the difficulty in keeping control of the tongue.

James provides several examples of how mankind has harnessed the power of something very strong. He reminds us of the bits placed in the mouths of horses that enable men to ride and the rudders of ships that enable a navigator to turn a ship on a proper course. In both instances something small turns something bigger.

In exactly the same way the tongue (a very small part of the body) is many times responsible for boasting great things. As a popular movie once expressed it, “Your mouth is writing checks that your body can’t cash”! James illustrates this by asking us to imagine a tremendous forest fire caused by only a single match. Truly our tongues get us in trouble far out of proportion to their size.

As James explains in verse 6 “the tongue is a fire” (Proverbs 16:27); a “world of iniquity” (Matthew 15:11, 18); and “so set among our members that it defiles the whole body”. It sets the course of nature on fire and is itself set on fire by hell. What a graphic description of the troubles we all have with our tongues.

In verse 7, James tells how man has tamed every type of beast found on the earth, but “no man can tame the tongue” (verse 8). Rather, the tongue is an “unruly evil” and “full of deadly poison” (Psalms 140:1-3). The tongue is a great contradiction as James tells us in verse 9. With the same tongue we bless and praise God (Hebrews 13:15) while also cursing men who are made in God’s image (Genesis 1:26).

How can Christians allow this type of contradiction? As James says, “My brethren, these things ought not to be so” (verse 10). Surely we can understand the trouble with the tongue. Out of the same mouth we bless and we curse. Even nature does not allow a contradiction like this. James gives two examples to prove his point: 1) does a spring send forth fresh and salt water from the same opening; and 2) can a fig tree bear olives, or a grape vine bear figs? We all know the answer to these questions. James has provided ample evidence of the trouble we have to keep from sinning with our tongues. In the next section he provides some answers for this problem.

Heavenly or earthly wisdom (verses 13-18)

“Who is wise and understanding among you”? The way a person proves their wisdom is by their conduct, including what they say. James tells us to show by “good conduct” that our works are done in the “meekness of wisdom”. This is very similar to what Paul commands in Galatians 6:4. Meekness implies “strength under control”. A good example would be a horse that has been broken to ride. The horse possesses tremendous power but this power has been harnessed. In the same way meekness does not mean weakness, but rather strength that is under control (James 1:21).

James uses the word wisdom several times in this Epistle (James 1:5; 3:13, 15, 17). This is the type of wisdom that leads a person to good conduct in contrast to the worldly wisdom described in verse 15. Worldly wisdom does not lead a person to good conduct, rather it leads to “bitter envy” and “self-seeking in your hearts” (Romans 13:13). If a person manifests this type of worldly wisdom James warns them not to compound their sin by “boasting” and lying against the truth.

How many congregations of God’s people have been divided and destroyed by uncontrolled tongues? How many congregations experience strife because members have bitter envy and self-seeking in their hearts? In back of the vast majority of church problems will be these types of sins. That is why James so adamantly warns against worldly wisdom. This wisdom comes from Satan himself rather than from God (James 1:5). Worldly wisdom is described as earthly, sensuous, and demonic. We should remember where the sins of the tongue originated. Satan is a liar and the father of all lies. Disrupted congregations are full of “confusion and every evil thing” as a result of the envy and self-seeking in the hearts of sinning Christians (1 Corinthians 3:1-3).

James ends this chapter by providing a better way. He instructs us to ask God for the wisdom which is from above (James 1:5). This type of wisdom possesses the following positive qualities: pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy, good fruits, without partiality, without hypocrisy. Any congregation full of Christians with this type of wisdom is a congregation that will withstand problems which would destroy other ones. This is only possible when “the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace, by those who make peace” (verse 18). May all of God’s people learn this lesson.