

Study 4: James Chapter 3

Introduction

James discusses the practical outcome of putting our faith into practice. There was a problem in the church that must have been occurring between brethren. Those in a teaching role were only there because of the personal glory that it brought. They had little concern for the growth that it brought about in those that they were leading. It showed up in their inconsistent manner of life.

Body of the Study

Teaching the word

Controlling our tongues

The Specific Problem of the Tongue

The root-cause of the problem

Homework and preparation for next week:

Read the notes as a review of the study

Read chapter 4 in preparation for next week

Think of some ways that we need to control our tongues. Particularly think about how others might think that we behave.

Our speech can lead to positive benefits to others. Think of the ways you can bless others by encouraging them. Write a letter or send a card to a specific person that you admire to praise and encourage their actions.

Notes for study 4: James Chapter 3

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Teaching the word

There are numerous places in the New Testament where we are instructed to teach the word, both by command (Mk 16:15; 2 Tim 2:2, 4:2; Tit 2:4) and by example (Acts 8:4, 18:26). It seems almost incongruous that James would say “...*let not many of you become teachers...*” (3:1 NKJV). However this can be reconciled by understanding that James is discussing the role of public teaching in the church, and many of the other examples refer to our personal evangelism. James fills in some of the gaps here when he adds “...*knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgement...*” (3:1 NKJV).

Those in the position of being public teachers have the potential to lead people astray by teaching false doctrines. They are placed in a position of trust, and with that trust comes accountability. Those in that position need to be acutely aware of their potential, and must be absolutely accurate in the things that are taught, lest others are led astray. It is because of just such a possibility that teachers are held in a position of higher accountability.

However, many of the Jewish Rabbis (teachers) of the time were only interested in being teachers because of the position of power and recognition that it gave them. They had no concern for those who were taught (c/f Jn 10:14-15), and had the wrong motives for what they were doing. They were only interested in *teaching*, and not interested in how the teaching *changed the lives* of those who heard the message. It comes back to the practical application of our faith that James has previously talked about.

This section relates to the rest of the discussion in the chapter (the power of the tongue) because it relates to the message that is delivered, and the revealer of that message (the teachers).

Controlling our tongues

James connects the discussion of the teacher with the inability to deliver a perfectly pure message “...*for we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man...*” (3:2 NKJV). We all make mistakes, and fortunately we are judged by a merciful God (2:13). But we need to recognise that *we are not* perfect, because if we were we would be “...*also able to bridle the whole body...*” (3:2 NKJV). James is leading into a discussion on controlling the things that we say (which leads to the things that we do) – and hence the discussion on controlling our tongues.

The only perfect example of a man who was in perfect and complete control in every situation is the Lord Jesus. All the rest of us have to learn our lessons the hard way. We make mistakes in the things that we do, and the things that we say to others.

If you think about the interactions that we have with other people, sometimes there is physical violence and abuse (which is almost always accompanied by verbal abuse), and sometimes there are just the unpleasant verbal interactions. People upset us by what they say (and a little closer to home often it is what we say to others that upsets them!). Stop and think about it – why do we let others “push our buttons” and get us upset to the point that we do things that we otherwise wouldn’t? And why do we say things to others that has a similar reaction in them? Often the things that are said are not aimed at upsetting the other person, (but unfortunately sometimes that are!). James hits at the root of the problem – the double-minded man (1:8) – and he will discuss the implications of this over the remainder of the chapter. Where the problem emerges is in us not controlling what we say – controlling our tongues.

James gives four examples of how our tongues (our speech) can bring us undone before he gets back to the root of the problem.

Bits in Horses' Mouths

The first example is that of a horse. A very small bit is put into the mouth of a large horse, which allows us to turn the head and communicate to the horse where we want him to go and what we want him (or her) to do. "...*When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal...*" (3:3 NIV). With a very small implement, a large animal is brought under control. In the same way, a person who controls their tongue can control their whole being.

Ship's Rudders

The second example is with the rudder, which is used to steer ships. I never cease to be amazed at just how small (relatively) the rudders of enormous ships actually are, when you see them out of the water. Have a look if you get to see one in dry-dock, or on a slipway. James' example relates to sailing ships, which are driven by huge gale force winds, and yet in the face of the storm a relatively small rudder can control them. "...*Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go...*" (3:4 NIV). The point of course, is to illustrate from nature that small things can bring about great effects. "...*Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts...*" (3:5 NIV).

Wildfire

South East Australia is one of the most fire prone areas of the world. High growth of the forest occurs during the spring, which dries out during the long hot summer. There are sustained periods of very low humidity, and strong winds, which both dry out the remaining moisture from the vegetation, and fan the flames of a fire, should one start. About every 10 or 15 years, huge fires develop which can burn large areas of the State, cause loss of life, and the destruction of many houses and properties. Some examples are "Black Friday" (Friday 13th February) 1939, Summer of 1960 which burnt much of the Dandenong Ranges, "Ash Wednesday" (Wednesday March 15th) 1982 when about ½ of Victoria and Sth Australia was burnt, as well as large areas of Southern NSW; The Canberra Fires of January 16th 2003; The Victorian Fires of February 2006, when about 25% of the State was burnt. Many of these fires are started by lightning, but sadly, some are deliberately lit, and others are the result of careless actions (such as cigarette butts thrown out of car windows). In all of these cases, it didn't take much to get such huge fires going. James says "...*Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark...*" (3:5 NIV).

In the same way as the small horses' bits, the small ship's rudders, and the small wildfire spark can bring about dramatic changes, so the tongue can bring about dramatic changes in our lives. If not controlled, the changes can be destructive. "...*The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell...*" (3:6 NIV).

Of course, it's not the physical piece of flesh that we call "the tongue" that James has in mind – rather it is our ability to control our speech and our actions that is the problem.

The inflammatory tongue has turned brother against brother, neighbor against neighbor, nation against nation. The tongue is also "a world of evil." It is as though all the wickedness in the whole world were wrapped up in that little piece of flesh. There are few sins people commit in which the tongue is not involved.

James describes the tongue's influence as both destructive and as corrupting the whole "person" (lit., "body");. Since the person resides in the body and uses the body as his or her instrument, James seems to use "body" to refer to the entire person. In reality, he is not referring to the tongue of flesh but to the intelligent, communicating mind that uses the tongue as its instrument. So the mind corrupts the whole person. But the corrupting influence of the tongue reaches out in widening circles, for it "sets the whole course of his life on fire." James is referring to the effect the tongue has on the whole of human

existence. Finally, he traces the inflaming nature of the tongue back to its source. It is "set on fire by hell"; this is James's way of saying that it comes from the devil. (NIVBC)

Taming of Animals

The fourth example is man's ability to tame wild animals. Although not so popular these days, the animals at the circus are able to perform some amazing tricks. They include the lions and tigers, as well as the elephants. James describes how "...*All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man...*" (3:7 NIV). In direct contrast to this "...*but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison...*" (3:8 NIV).

The Specific Problem of the Tongue

James gets down to the nitty gritty as he discusses the specific problem and how it is made manifest "...*But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God...*" (3:9 NKJV). We can see (or rather hear) the inconsistencies – it comes back to the double-minded man (1:8) as the root-cause of the problem. The double standard is further seen "...*Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing...*" (3:10 NKJV).

We are to be in control of our tongue. We need to take control of our thoughts and our speech. If there is any doubt about our ability to control these things, James adds "...*My brethren, these things ought not to be so...*" (3:10 NKJV). James is quite specific as to whom he has in mind – it is not those outside of the church, but those inside! He says *my brethren* so the problem comes back to those inside the church who are professing Christians on the one hand, but when their back is turned around, they swear and curse, use profanities, and put other people down by what they say. Their speech betrays them.

Nature is always consistent. Some creeks are sweet and some is bitter. But it is not a matter of chance on how things are on the day. The sweet creek will always have sweet water, and the bitter water will always be bitter "...*Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening?...*" (3:11 NKJV).

In a similar way the fruit of a tree tells you what kind of tree it is – and it never changes (by their fruits you shall know them Mt 7:20). Whilst we can graft one kind of fruit onto another tree (a pear onto an apple tree, or an orange onto a lemon tree for instance), these things do not occur in nature. Nor can we find different "kinds" of fruit on the same tree (an apple on an orange tree for instance). "...*Can a fig tree, my brethren bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring can yield both salt water and fresh...*" (3:12 NKJV). Roper¹ spells out the example for us:

"To be very personal: Picture the family singing praises together in the assembly – and then fussing and fighting in the car all the way home!"

The root-cause of the problem

The root cause of the problem is two kinds of wisdom. One comes from God, and the other from Satan. James asks the question "...*Who is wise and understanding among you?...*" (3:13 NIV). He is addressing the teachers (3:1), but the problem is not in what they teach, but that their lives are inconsistent with their teaching. "...*Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom...*" (3:13 NIV). They were being hypocrites and their lives do not reflect their teaching. Note that James connects the growth cycle here: *humility comes from wisdom*. First we acquire knowledge, and then wisdom develops with the application of that knowledge; but wisdom alone is not enough. We could be puffed up by our knowledge, but the wise person knows that is not the best course of action. If he is truly wise, he will learn and develop to be humble. But that is not the end of the matter either, for our faith is a practical faith, not a theoretical one (2:18). We put our faith into practice by showing it through the things that

¹ Roper, p. 66

we do in our life – but not in a “show-off” way, but rather one that is very controlled and very humble.

In contrast, some people are still bitter and twisted underneath, and are full of hatred for others. “...*But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth...*” (3:14 NIV). At the very least, we need to control our outward expressions, even if underneath we still are bitter and twisted. Ultimately it comes from totally committing ourselves to God, totally trusting in Him, and letting Him deal with the target of our hatred. This is especially so in the context of the letter, as James is not primarily addressing the attitude that we have to those outside the church, but specifically to those who are our brothers and sisters inside the church (3:9).

Those who claim to be wise and behave in such a way need to recognise that the source of behaviour is not God. “...*Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil...*” (3:15 NIV).

James does not have in mind the Greek concept of speculative or theoretical wisdom but the Hebrew idea of practical wisdom that enables one to live a life of godliness. (NIVBC)

The double minded man who purports to say one thing, but in practice by his actions does the opposite, only teaches because of his selfish desires “...*For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice...*” (3:16 NIV). The result is disorder, and underneath the (hidden) practice of all kinds of evil. The man is *unstable in all his ways*.

In contrast, true wisdom comes from God “...*But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy...*” (3:17 NKJV).

In contrast to the denial of v. 15, James turns to a description of "the wisdom that comes from heaven." Its basic characteristic is "pure" (GK G54). The reference is not to sexual purity but to the absence of any sinful attitude or motive. It is the opposite of the self-seeking attitude of vv. 14-16. From this inner quality flow the outward manifestations given in the rest of the verse.

James goes on to describe this wisdom as "peace-loving" (GK G1646), in contrast to the bitter spirit of competitiveness and selfish ambition described in v. 14. Next, it is "considerate" (GK G2117). In the LXX this word is used mostly of God's disposition as King. He is gentle and kind, although in reality he has every reason to be stern and punitive toward people in their sin. God's people also are to be marked by this godlike quality, not insisting on their legal rights but exercising love's leniency instead.

Likewise, godly wisdom is "submissive" (GK G2340). This quality is the opposite of obstinacy and self-seeking; it is a readiness to yield. Furthermore, it is "full of mercy and good fruit." That is, it is compassionate and always ready to help those who are in need. It is "impartial" (GK G88), showing no favoritism, and discriminating against no one. Finally, this wisdom is "sincere" (lit., "without hypocrisy"; GK G537). Far from being theoretical and speculative, James's concept of wisdom is thoroughly practical. It is the understanding and attitude that result in true piety and godliness. (NIVBC)

James concludes by observing that “...*the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace...*” (3:18 NKJV).