

THIS WEEK'S MESSAGE

DECEMBER 17TH - 18TH, 2022 // BOOK OF JAMES

THE TONGUE (JAMES 3:1-12) A WARNING

Ch. 2 ends with the thought, "faith without works is dead."

- James begins chapter 3 with an example of a work highly visual while also having the primary function of speaking: teaching, and a warning that teachers will receive a stricter judgment (v. 1), echoing Jesus' warning to the Pharisees (Matthew 23).
- The culmination of this warning is a challenge to those who desire to become teachers: is it earthly wisdom that drives you (vv. 14-16) or wisdom from above (vv.17-18)?

WE ALL STUMBLE...

As in v. 1, in v. 2, James identifies himself with his audience. As a teacher and pastor of the Jerusalem church, he knows first-hand how hard it is to be a teacher. Teachers must practice what they teach/preach (Mt 23:3-4; Rm 2:19-24). Teachers must also have the right motives (Mt 23:5-7).

- Teaching is a spiritual gift and calling (Eph 4:11). It takes maturity to serve the body with any gift, but the stakes are higher when you are teaching.

MATURITY

Stumbling is evidence of a need for further maturity. By contrast, James gives us an example of maturity: "if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is mature, able also to control the whole body"(v. 2).

- "Mature" isn't sinless perfection, but rather the fruit of humility and righteousness (v. 17). When we are sensitive to the instruction and correction of the Holy Spirit and Scripture, we will be matured more and more, and our words and actions will reflect that.

THE BIT AND THE RUDDER

Vv. 3-4 offer two analogies describing the tongue: one focused on directing in response to internal forces (horse's will), the other external forces (wind and current). The tongue, too, is small in comparison to the body it directs (v. 5). In both analogies, there is someone who is driving, who is in control.

- We have internal and external forces attempting to affect our every decision. We are still responsible for what we say and do.

WHAT WE SAY

Teaching in the first century was primarily spoken, which is why James starts to focus on what people say. Saying can also be in written form as well, which has the capacity to affect people far removed from the moment for good or bad. This is not just for teachers, however.

- We all must be careful with every word we say and write, and we will all be judged by our words, not just teachers (Mt 12:36-37). We don't know just how far our words reach.

WISDOM

The Bible has a lot to say about the words we speak, particularly in Proverbs but elsewhere as well.

- "The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life" (Pr 10:11).
- "For the mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart" (Mt 12:34).
- "A wise person's instruction is a fountain of life" (Pr 13:14).

"There is one who speaks rashly, like a piercing sword; but the tongue of the wise brings healing" (Pr 12:18).

- "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt" (Col 4:6).
- "A worthless person[s]...speech is like a scorching fire" (Pr 16:27).
- "Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit" (Pr 18:21).

THE POWER TO DESTROY

James goes on to describe the tongue as "a fire" that is "itself set on fire by hell," and a "world of unrighteousness" that "stains the whole body, [and] sets the course of life on fire" (v. 6).

- The untamed tongue, powered by sin, is highly destructive, not only for our own lives, but also the lives of those around us (spouses, children, other family members, and loved ones), and can ruin the course of life in moments.

UNTAMABLE ANIMAL?

"Every kind" (v. 7)—James knows there are animals that are untamable (crocodiles, rhinoceroses, etc.). His point is humans, by their will, have tamed many kinds of beasts, and yet the tongue is a "restless evil, full of deadly poison" (v. 8) that cannot be tamed by human will.

- The sin in our heart is "crouching at the door" (Gn 4:7) of our mouths, ready to pounce. It takes submission to the Word and the Holy Spirit to tame it. Without that, everything we say and do is poisoned.

BLESSING & CURSING

Vv. 9-10 talk about the results of our own efforts to tame the tongue. We bless our Lord and curse His likeness (people), which is just like cursing Him. It is audacious to praise God and, in the next breath, condemn Him by condemning people. "These things should not be..."

- Everything we say and do out of our own strength and will is tainted by sin. Without the wisdom God so richly gives (1:5), the result is inconsistency, instability, and double-mindedness (1:8).

INCONSISTENCY

James asks a couple of rhetorical questions to drive home this point: can a spring produce both fresh and bitter water (v. 11)? Can a tree cultivated for a particular fruit produce a different fruit (v. 12)? The answer to both, of course, is "no." The produce of a particular thing reveals its true nature.

- What comes out of us reveals our true nature (Mt 7:16-20; 12:35). Followers of Jesus are to be fountains of "living water" (Jn 7:38) and to be "filled with the fruit of righteousness" (Php 1:11) because of Him.

EARTHLY OR HEAVENLY (JAMES 3:13-18) THE LITMUS TEST

Teachers are considered wise and understanding, and James is making it clear that those who wish to be considered so must prove it. Gentleness, or meekness, in deeds is the indicator of godly wisdom in v. 13. Gentleness is not weakness but indicates control over strength and restraint in order to not damage.

- This is not just for teachers! When we are over-zealous in our words and deeds, by not putting godly wisdom into practice, we can do more harm than good.

DEFINING HARM IN YOUR HEART

Bitter: angry, hurt, or resentful because of one's bad experiences or a sense of unjust treatment.

- Envy: painful or resentful awareness of an advantage enjoyed by another joined with a desire to possess the same advantage.
- Selfish: concerning one's own welfare or advantage in disregard of others.
- Ambition: a powerful personal drive to achieve goals which are regarded as important to the individual.

HARMFUL MOTIVES

- James asks his audience to consider their motives. Is it because of "bitter envy and selfish ambition" that they want to be teachers? If so, boasting in their position would be a gross denial of the truth about their calling to that position (v. 14). This isn't only a danger in the desire to teach but also in the desire for any position of perceived prominence.
- We must make sure that our desire to express our faith (do good works) in our calling and gifting is not driven by impure motives and earthly wisdom.

EARTHLY WISDOM

As Christians, we have three enemies: the world ("earthly"), the flesh ("unspiritual"), and Satan ("demonic"). James tells us that these are the source of the "wisdom" born of "envy and selfish ambition" (vv. 15-16). And we know this wisdom by its fruit: "disorder and every evil practice" (Gal 5:19-21).

- If we pay attention to what the world says, what our sinful flesh desires, and the whispers of Satan, we will be deceived into operating in our own wisdom and strength, which leads to disorder and evil (Genesis 3).

HEAVENLY WISDOM

By contrast, in v. 17 James describes the "wisdom from above" as:

- "first pure" – (Pr 30:5; Ps 12:6)
- "peace-loving" – (Ps 119:165; Pr 3:17)
- "gentle" – (Pr 15:1)
- "compliant" – (obedient, Heb. 5:8; 1 Pet 1:14)
- "full of mercy and good fruits" – (Mt 5:7; Gal 5:22)
- "unwavering" – (Mt 7:24)
- "without pretense" – (Pr 4:24; 30:8)

FRUIT OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

- All of these are the "fruit of righteousness" of v. 18. This fruit is born of the wisdom found throughout God's Word, the Bible, as well as the guidance and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.
- As others see us practicing this wisdom in gentleness with respect to how we love God and love them, the fruit of that is sown into their lives as we "cultivate" peace between them and God. "Blessed are the peacemakers..."(Mt. 5:9)

MOTIVES OF A PEACEMAKER

James is telling his audience that sharing and spreading this godly wisdom, this "wisdom from above," should be their motive for desiring to teach, not their "selfish ambition" or "envy." Their drive should be to "cultivate peace" between people and the loving, heavenly Father.

- As a people who are called to be disciple-makers (Mt. 28:18-20), in essence, we will all teach. As we live out this calling and practice other giftings, we need to keep this "wisdom from above" as our driving force.

WHAT ARE OUR MOTIVES?

- As we seek to express our faith and giftings, what drives us? Is it selfish ambition? Is it envy?
- Do we want the recognition without the responsibility and accountability?
- Or do we truly desire to help people learn about our Lord and have a relationship with Him by sowing the "fruit of righteousness" as cultivators of peace?

WHO IS IN CONTROL?

- Does our flesh (internal) have the "bit" that is our tongue? Does the world and Satan (external) have the "rudder"?
- Or does Jesus Christ have the bit and rudder?
- We have to be sure!
- As we consider the things we say, write, and do, what is the fruit of those things?

KNOW THEM BY THEIR FRUIT

- How can we be sure we are producing righteous fruit?
- Do you have a relationship with Christ?
- Are we engaged in the disciplines of being a disciple (follower) of Christ?
- Prayer, reading the Bible, being in community with other followers (not "church"), fasting.
- Are we serving the body and serving others?
- Are we making disciples of Jesus?