

JAMES – BEING RIGHT IN A WRONG WORLD  
Based on the book by the same name  
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SESSION 3

Sunday, January 29, 2012

STUDY NOTES

Chapter 3 Words and Wisdom – Focal Text: James 3:1-18

We definitely live in a wrong world. So what does it take to live in it?

I. Teachers Beware – James 3:1 - “Let not many *of you* become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.”

II. The perils of being a teacher in the church - James 3:1 - “Let not many *of you* become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.”

A. Why did James switch to the topic of the tongue in chapter 3?

1. Pride and status were motivating believers to become teachers. In James’s day, to be called “rabbi” was an honor. Still today, we those who teach in high honor because of their intellectual achievement. We assume also that being able to teach confers authority. Since the only Scriptures at this time was the Old Testament, it was important that those who aspired to teach it be educated in it. Yet few rabbis became followers of Jesus, so teachers were at a premium.

If pride and status were the prime motives for becoming a teacher in the church, then those who presumed to be the most educated would be those most inclined to teach. But, as McCullar notes, “many of them would not have been prepared to lead a congregation from traditional Judaism to the new faith in Messiah Jesus.” (p. 64

2. Jewish converts were teaching that it was necessary to obey the Law of Moses. If rabbis became teachers, it would have been extremely difficult for them to NOT to emphasize obedience to the law in addition to, or at least as important as, faith in Christ for salvation.

It also would have been natural for Jewish Christians to turn over the task of teaching to the rabbis, or to someone else who claimed to know the Scriptures. (But see Matt. 23:2-7).

Thus James’ warned those who would aspire to teach in the church of facing “a stricter judgment” because any attitude of pride or superiority on their part would contradict the “humility and godly wisdom” (McCullar, p. 64) that’s required of those who teach.

3. Unqualified teachers were seeking to be teachers for the wrong reasons. James makes a blanket statement in verse 1 to those who would aspire to teach. He gives no reason for writing this, so we have to try to discover what situation(s) moved him to write. We have to determine the “context” in which James wrote.

McCullar writes something about how we are to interpret James 3:1-18 that’s important. He writes, “nor is it certain that the following verses are to be applied specifically to those who teach or more generally to the entire congregations of believers.” (p. 65) Throughout history, Christians have tended to interpret what James says about the tongue in a general way, as I did this

morning in the AM sermon. But if we interpret these verses “in context,” what James says is directed to the greater judgment by God that teachers will face as regards their use of their tongue.

Were unqualified people actually teaching Scripture? It seems so, for why else would James write this? Were Hebrew women, who made up the greatest percentage of believers (see Acts 16:13), and who had some knowledge of Scripture, presuming to teach? (If you read chapter 3 in your Study Guide, you read McCullar’s claim that “they (women). . .were not yet ready to take on high levels of responsibility.” (p. 65) You will have to decide for yourself whether a literalist interpretation that a woman is not allowed to speak at all in church is the correct one. (See Paul in 1 Tim., 2:12 - “I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.”))

Was Paul a bigot, or simply a child of his culture? Did Paul and James believe women were not “ready” at this point in Christian history to teach? Are women ready today to teach, to serve as deacons? (I’ll let you tell them they’re not, if that’s what you believe!)

4. Pagan beliefs and practices were infiltrating the church. We must not miss James’s point in verse 2. “For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.” We know from experience that we humans stumble (make mistakes) in many ways. If a person never makes a mistake in what he says, he’s able to also completely control his whole body without making mistakes as well. Since none of us can claim to be “perfect” (τέλειος, teleios - complete, entire), we would be wise to think long and hard about aspiring to be a teacher in the church.
5. An extraordinarily large number of believers were seeking to teach. If this was the case in the churches to

which James wrote, then the problem had reached crisis proportions, and James felt he had to write and warn those who aspired to be teachers that they would be held to greater scrutiny by God for what they said (inference, how they used their tongues).

6. The long and short of it. The code of ethics for teachers is stricter than for other believers. We must not miss James's point in verse 2. "For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well." We know from experience that we humans stumble (make mistakes) in many ways. If a person never makes a mistake in what he says, he's able to also completely control his whole body without making mistakes as well. Since none of us can claim to be "perfect" (τέλειος, teleios - complete, entire), we would be wise to think long and hard about aspiring to be a teacher in the church.

B. Examples of the tongue's power. James 3:3-5a - "Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. **4** Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. **5a** So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and *yet* it boasts of great things."

1. Two common metaphors

- a. A big, strong horse is controlled by a small bit.
- b. A big ship is controlled by a small rudder.

2. Main point. That which is small can yield power way beyond its size. One of the smallest parts our body can control the whole.

3. The tongue's justified boasting. *James 3:5a* - "So also the

tongue is a small part of the body, and *yet* it boasts of great things.” Since the tongue is such a small part of the body, it is justified to boast of its power in relation to its size.

C. The tongue’s evil power – three points (James 3:5b-10a).

1. A negative image: like fire, the tongue affects the whole (vv. 5b-6) Fire serves as a metaphor for God’s anger (see Isa. 30:27). Note that Isaiah is not highlighting the intense, consuming, destructive nature of God’s wrath, but His righteous indignation toward all that opposes His will.

2. A second negative image: like fire, the tongue cannot be tamed (5:7-8). Here James highlights the tongue’s uncontrollable nature. We must monitor constantly our tongues and control them, or its deadly effects will spread and cause as much harm as possible; and often more harm than we intended.

2: 8 - “But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.” The restless nature of the tongue lies behind its uncontrollable, untamable, and deadly effects.

3. Jewish wisdom relating speech to fire. Prov. 6:27 - “Can a man take fire in his bosom and his clothes not be burned?”

Prov. 26:21 - “Like charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire, so is a contentious man to kindle strife.”

Note the probing nature of these two bits of Hebrew wisdom. The writer doesn’t just spout words to the effect that if you touch hot coals you will get burned. Rather, he brings it painfully close to home. He infers that no one in their right mind would pick up a burning ember from a fire and place it in his shirt, or pants. The person would undoubtedly get burned, and possibly burn to death. And yet “the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity. . . (it) sets on fire the course of

our life (lit. the cycles of life; the ups and downs and ins and outs of life), and is set on fire by hell.”

In other words, each one of us possesses a member in our body that possesses the potential to destroy us and everything around us. A contentious person is particularly adept at this.

3. A third *positive* image: Like fire, the tongue is a source of both good (potentially creative) and evil (potentially destructive) (5:8-10). In verses 8-10, James switches from a negative warning of the tongue as a fire to the positive exhortation to consider the positive potential of the tongue. (He doesn't forget the destructive aspect of the tongue, but he highlights the constructive possibilities of the tongue.) As he does so, James seems to expose the contradictory nature of the tongue. With the same member of the body we bless and curse, often in succession.

It could be that James got the idea of the tongue possessing the potential for both good and evil from the ability of fire to do good (give warmth) and to cause destruction (burn down a home). Thus, the tongue, like fire, is ambiguous.

James affirms the dual nature of the tongue in v. 9. It can both bless and it can curse.

However, James is speaking positively of the tongue, even though he seems to still be negative. Notice how James says, “With it ‘we’ bless our Lord and Father, and with it ‘we’ curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God.” That’s totally positive in that it exhorts us to consider deeply why we should bless and not curse others with our tongues.

4. Extra-biblical (outside the Bible) teaching concerning the tongue.

2 Enoch 44:1-2 (A Slavic epistle dating from around the 2nd

century B.C.E.)

“The Lord with his own hands created mankind; in a facsimile of his own face, both small and great, the Lord created them. And whoever insults a person’s face, insults the face of a king, and treats the face of the Lord with repugnance.” (quoted by Marie E. Isaacs. *Reading Hebrews and James*, p. 217)

Even though this quote is from an apocryphal (of doubtful authorship or authenticity) book, it nonetheless shows the influence of Hebrew scripture and wisdom were in this day (probably 2nd century B.C., c. 168 B.C.)

III. Who’s to blame for what the tongue does? James does two things here.

- A. He places the blame for what the tongue does (blesses and curses) squarely where it belongs - on us. We bless and curse with it.
- B. He says that to curse people is to curse God, since all mankind is made in God’s image (Genesis 1:26; 9:2). It ought not to be this way (v. 10).
- C. The phrase “these things ought not to be this way” points to the fact that God never intended for our tongues to possess this dual nature.
- D. In Deuteronomy 30:19, Joshua, God’s spokesman (prophet) says to God’s people, “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live. . .” Blessing and cursing are clearly God’s prerogative.

#### IV. Bless and do not curse (NT).

Luke 6:28 - "Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."

Romans 12:14 - "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse."

1 Cor. 16:22 - "If anyone does not love the Lord, he is to be accursed. Maranatha."

#### V. A concluding summary

**10b** "My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.

**11** Does a fountain send out from the same opening *both* fresh and bitter *water*

**12** Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor *can* salt water produce fresh."

VI. Who should teach? "Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom." (3:13, NASB)

A. James may still be writing in the context of those who aspire to teach in the church. Is he referring to teachers when he writes, "Who among you is wise and understanding?" He seems to be addressing a subset of people within the larger group; or, as others think, is James referring to everyone in the congregation as a whole, who also are to live by the wisdom that comes from above? (James 3:15)

B. James's point: "A person's entire mode of life should

demonstrate that his actions are inspired by wisdom.” (Marie Isaacs, *Reading Hebrews and James - A Literary and Theological Commentary*, p. 219)

C. One reason for thinking that James is addressing the whole Christian community here is the fact that what has to say about the tongue in 3:1-12 is that which pertains to every believer, not just to those who would teach.

D. James is correct in saying that teachers in the church will be held to a higher level of judgment (accountability), but when it comes to living by wisdom (wisely living life by prudent, experienced, and competent knowledge), all believers share that responsibility. “But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing.”

VI. The path to purity (3:17-18) In these closing verses of chapter three, James contrasts the pure and peaceful life that results from seeking wisdom from above with the chaos that inevitably results when one lives on the level of the natural self. In true biblical fashion, James highlights seven (7) traits of those who live in the peaceful humility of wisdom.

A. Purity – Gentle and lenient. This word (trait) conveys the idea of a person “who through wronged and possessing the ‘right’ not to bend nonetheless forgoes his right.” (Hughes, p. 158; quoted by McCullar, p. 76)

Paul uses the same word in Philippians 4:5, where it is translated “moderation.” The gentle person is never “pushy,” seeking and demanding his or her own way.

B. Full of mercy - Full of compassion and love, expressed in tangible ways, and not just feelings and emotions.

C. Good fruit - A person whose good works naturally follow their

salvation experience.

This person's "good fruits" will reveal in them a vital, active faith. (Compare this to Paul's teachings on the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gala. 5:22)

D. Impartial – "without a trace of partiality." (NRSV)

We can easily relate this back to what James says in chapter one regarding the sin of impartiality (2:1ff)

(This word is used only by James in the New Testament.)

E. Sincerity – without hypocrisy

Clark's Online Commentary interprets this trait as: ". . . without hypocrisy; without pretending to be what it's not; acting always in its own character; never working under a mask."

F. To summarize (3:18)

James simply means, "Sowing seeds of peace will, in time, produce righteous fruit that is pleasing to God." (McCullar, p. 78)

The opposite would also be true. "Sowing seeds of chaos and disorder will, in time, lead to evil fruit and away from God." (Ibid.)

