

This Week in the Word

Forever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens. Ps 119:89.



A Disciplined Faith **Study Scripture: James 3** **Lesson 11 February 10th, 2018.**

KEY VERSE

BUT THE TONGUE CAN NO MAN TAME; IT IS AN UNRULY EVIL, FULL OF DEADLY POISON.

James 3:8

Lesson today focuses on demonstrating the living faith, which all true believers possess, in the manner in which we control our speech. We must be very blunt as we address professed believers in this Lesson Study on “A Disciplined Faith”. One well-known scholar explains why as follows:

“We live in an age where the word “Christian” is, for many, a synonym for ‘hypocrites’. We are often accused of sanctimonious claims while acting just like everybody else

And also: “James is neither soft nor cerebral. He’s quick moving, hardnosed, steeped in Judaism. He focuses less on what to believe and more of the way of life that belief inspires.

James gives attention to godly wisdom and applies this to the development of godly character”.

We must challenge this commonly held caricature of Christianity. We frankly have no choice. If we intend to follow Jesus we must demonstrate we have the nature of Jesus and our deeds including our speech must characterize the life of Christ.

Understand therefore that if your heart is not fixed your tongue cannot be fixed.

“The reason the tongue can’t be tamed”, as one writer states, “is that it is organically connected to the heart.....Our words will finally declare what’s inside us”. We often hear people say that someone they know brings out the worst in them, for these people just push their buttons.

But in reality the worst is already sitting down there waiting for something or someone to bring the worst to the surface. So do not blame others for the evil work of your tongue. It all belongs to you.

In chapter 2:12 we are warned “to speak as those who will be judged”, indicating that our words should be used as a means of blessing, and all our words will be judged, according to God’s law which of course cannot be separated from His mercy. Words aimed at bringing God’s blessing are acceptable, for those words involve not only judgment but mercy. Those that did not bring both were not according to the ‘law of liberty’.

We and our words will be judged and hence caution should be exercised.

Our previous lesson on being “Impartial Disciples” is very important, for we can and most often do express partiality with our words. So James gives us directions about our words, so that we can know the will of God in this area of our lives.

James insists that if there are no good works, we will fall under God’s disciplinary punishment. Some hold the view that the absence of good works in one’s life is a sign that such a person is not a true believer and will face the punishment of hellfire. While there is disagreement on this matter, the scriptures are clear that a Christian is to “walk by faith” and if there is no such walk there would be disciplinary punishment which might even result in premature physical death. (See 1 Corinthians 5, 10, 11:27-30; Hebrews 12).

James warns believers against any abandonment of their ‘walk by faith’. This then is a discussion in sanctification, teaching believers how to live the Christian life.

Note this is not a mild request from God. James expresses the mind of Christ. Whether we like it or not this is a command and we had better realize there are consequences to disobedience.

The Apostle previously discussed the importance of words, the use of which is regarded as one of the most important aspect of our works. (See chapter 1:19-27). There his readers were urged to be “slow to speak” and to bridle their tongues. Not doing that indicates that there is self-deception and futile religion.

James focus in this lesson applies to the use of words generally and particularly on the misuse of the tongue in Christian worship. This is also a lesson against idle speech.

James will now aim directly at leaders that the church had called to control and guide its life and destiny. He will use two figures of speech to make his point clear, and these are the imagery of the horse’s bit, and a ship’s rudder.

It should be remembered that a faith without works is unprofitable and dead. It would seem from James’s discourse that those who say they have faith but behave in certain unacceptable ways are most likely to be affected by sins of the tongue.

James cautions against the mischievous use of the tongue and the self-aggrandizing, demanding attitude that goes with power and position.

THE TEXT

Verse 1. This verse is structured in the form of a command to 'wanna-be' teachers. James is here pointing out that those who wish to be teachers should be cautioned, that they have greater accountability and have the greater difficulty of not stumbling.

The word suggests that James is cautioning those who want to teach in the church, and it seems evident that those ministering in that role were often unworthy and should step down. Leaders who control and guide the life of believers are reminded of the importance of what the bit in the mouth of the horse and the rudder in a ship is set up to do. This should not be interpreted that James is forbidding anyone from directing and instructing others, but it is clear that there is an evil in desiring to be a teacher while at the same time not been qualified for the office.

The word translated "masters" has the primary idea of teaching and is used to point to an instructor or a schoolmaster. The position of a teacher therefore indicates authority not based on power per se but on superior qualification.

A look at the prevailing culture indicates the difficult and dangerous ideas which were prevalent. The Jews regarded teachers or rabbis with great respect and honored them. (See Matthew 23: 1-8). The Apostle Paul also examined this attitude in Romans 2:19-21. (See also 1 Timothy 1:5-7). We know that many of the Jewish people coveted the name or office of Rabbi and had the great desire and ambition to be doctors and teachers. The Jews tended to regard their Rabbis with awe and gave them much honor. These were powerful people.

Note that today we see the same attitude displayed in the Christian church by people who do not have the ability or knowledge required but they have ambition to be teachers and exercise authority.

Today we see the same attitude to teachers and leaders in the Church. Even if the modern church members realize that their teachers and leaders are incompetent and unworthy, often largely because of laziness and little interest in spending much time studying the Word of God for themselves, they still honor them and will allow them to continue their destructive course among the brethren.

The general practice during the services in the synagogue was to allow men in the congregation to address the assembly and we note that Jesus took advantage of this to address his countrymen though they did not like what He said. (See also Acts 13:15 for this custom).

The Christians obviously followed the same practice and it would seem that there were many in the church who though not qualified, were aspiring to teach others publicly, because of the prestige attached to teaching or for some other motive. So James warned that God will judge a teacher more strictly than a non-teacher for the reasonable presumption was that they knew the truth and were claiming they lived by the truth.

This should not be looked at as an attack on the office of teacher or the role of teaching. James actually states that he was a teacher, so he would not be condemning himself. But he clearly wished to place this caution on the record and restrain those who were rushing to teach, even though they were not qualified. It should appear that the role of teacher can easily bring spiritual and intellectual pride and that is a great danger to everyone.

No person should rush to become an instructor in sacred matters. The position of teachers is not to be taken lightly in the church for the responsibility that comes with it is extremely serious. Teachers are more accountable than others and they will receive a stricter or literally a “more severe” trial, judgment, or accounting. To whom much is given much is required, according to Luke 12:48.

James is here reminding people who seek positions that they should think about the judgment seat that they will face and then determine whether or not they want to enter certain ministries. The judgment seat of Christ should be considered before making up one’s mind in regard to any particular ministry.

The situation of being in a role in the church to which God has not called us makes our case quite awful. We will receive greater judgment than common sinners, for not only have we sinned in putting ourselves into an office to which God never called us; but because we are unable to perform that office properly, and we have assumed mastery over others and made them perish for lack of knowledge, the blood of these people will be required by God from you.

This however should not deter those that are called by God. If we are called by God, He will show us by several things that He wants us to be in particular roles. There are personality traits, qualifications, and standards laid down in Scripture for every office in the church and those called by God should meet those standards or show such promise. Then after a person has been chosen by God, that person should learn, practice, and study so that they can serve God faithfully. One writer comments sadly: “How many at the close of life, in the ministry and out of it, feel, when too late to make a change, that they have wholly mistaken the purpose for which they should have lived!”

Verse 2. James says this caution is important for we all stumble, or offend, err, or fail in our duty. We all commit errors and so we should be cautious in seeking an office where we are likely to commit errors and cause a great deal of damage.

This should produce a sobering attitude because of our common weaknesses. Note that the word translated “stumble” or “offend” does not imply a fatal fall. But it certainly

indicates that we should make every attempt to walk so closely to God and avoid offending men, and behave with sincerity, that our lives will be marked by less and less stumbling.

Note carefully that this sin that James discusses, is a sin common to all human beings. Those who do not share in this sin is a perfect person. This claim of 'perfection' is a rather unlikely claim one can make. See 1 John 1 where that Apostle say those that make the claim of sinless perfection is a liar.

As James focuses on the tongue, he introduces a measure or a test of spiritual maturity which applies to teachers and all Christian. He says that to not get tripped-up by one's own tongue, shows true spiritual maturity. This of course is something to which teachers should pay special attention, since they have more opportunity to sin with their tongue than anyone else.

Every man seems to have the tendency to sin with the tongue. Nobody seems to have controlled or mastered the tongue except Jesus Christ. Titus 1:11 regards the misuse of the tongue as a most awful sin.

Those, especially teachers, who demonstrate using the tongue properly, is one who has dominion over himself, having complete control over himself, and is spiritually mature. If he can control his tongue he can control his body.

That man or teacher not adversely affected by sins with the tongue and who is therefore guided by God's wisdom and grace and enabled to control his tongue, will as a direct consequence, be able to rule all his actions.

So we are advised to be very careful in governing our tongue. We must bridle it. To bridle means to lead or guide with a bit, to check, moderate, and to restrain. The sharper your tongue the more you should exert energy to control it. Psalm 39:1 states for our admonition: "I said, I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue: I will keep my mouth with a bridle, while the wicked is before me." Proverbs 34:3 advises: "He that keepeth his mouth keepeth his life:but he that openeth wide his lips shall have destruction."

Proverbs 21:23 state: "Whoso keepeth his mouth and his tongue, keepeth his soul from troubles."

And of course Proverbs 34:13 commands: "Keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile."

Note that the Apostle Paul warned the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:30-32 that they should be careful, for from their own group men would arise speaking and teaching perversions of the truth to draw away disciples after them. The tongue is a dangerous thing because of its potential to mislead others, causing their destruction.

The adult Christian who is fully instructed in the gospel, will teach no false doctrines, and will not modify or make imperfect the great truths of Christianity. He will be able to prove himself to be no learner or novice, but one who understands the divine, behaving appropriately and thus worthy of being a faithful or wise servant (Matt 24:45).

Scripture teaches us that the common saying “Sticks and stones will break my bones but names will never hurt me” is extremely false.

Words must be taken seriously and there should be no flippancy when falsehoods are uttered.

We remind believers again that words set in motion great and powerful events, shape the course of history, change relationships often for the worst but sometimes for the better, and they build up or destroy

Verse 3. James now illustrates the power of the tongue. He gives us two examples which connect the tongue’s impact, linking it to the totality of control.

He tells us that a strong horse, capable of great feats of strength and endurance, is otherwise unruly and ungovernable and can easily unseat; but if a tiny bit is put in the horse’s mouth that powerful animal is easily controlled and can be made to obey every command. The entire body of the horse can be turned in any required direction because of this small bit.

One writer warns:

“You don’t solve the problem of an unruly horse by keeping in the barn, or the problem of a hard to steer ship by keeping it tied to the dock. In the same way, even a vow of silence is not the ultimate answer for the misuse of the tongue”.

Verse 4. The great and powerful ships, though they are great, are only driven by fierce winds which seem to drive the ships beyond control. Still, these great ships can themselves be turned, steered, and controlled by anyone having command of the very small rudder. Our very lives like these unwieldy ships can be controlled by something very small compared with its entire body.

Verse 5. The insignificant and tiny bit and rudder all have the power to direct and control, similarly, the tongue, though little, has comparable power. It is very influential and boasts all kinds of powerful sounding words.

The tongue is conscious of its influence and power and boasts of what it can do. And it can do much. It can start a very small fire which can set ablaze a great amount of material. A word spoken by it can set ablaze a town or a country and cause many to suffer the consequences. It has the power to wound just as a little fire can destroy a forest.

Clearly then that the tongue is capable of doing a lot of good or a lot of evil. An unruly tongue brings terrible evil.

The great task of a Christian therefore is to learn how to properly manage the tongue, for if that is controlled the entire man can be governed appropriately. Of course, this can only be done when one places oneself under the guidance and control of the Holy Spirit. Jesus ministered in the power of the Spirit and was the only one that mastered the tongue. Our only hope to master the tongue is to submit every word to the Spirit's direction.

Verse 6. The tongue has such great destructive power that it can actually be described as "a world of iniquity". Its effect is as a fire. It has a dreadful effect on the rest of our bodies, and since it is a terrible fire and out of control it damages the rest of the body. It even sets society on fire by its actions.

It is a little world of evil, and it represents the world with every kind of evil that exists in of the world concentrated right there in that little but powerful member of the human body. One writer describes this phrase's meaning as follows:

"Who can measure the evils which arise from scandal, and slander, and profaneness, and perjury, and falsehood, and blasphemy, and obscenity, and the inculcation of error, by the tongue? Who can gauge the amount of broils, and contentions, and strifes, and wars, and suspicions, and enmities, and alienation among friends and neighbors, which it produces? Who can number the evils produced by the 'honeyed' words of the seducer, or the tongue of the eloquent in the maintenance of error, and the defense of wrong?

If all men were dumb, what a portion of the crimes of the world would soon cease! If all men would speak only that which ought to be spoken, what a change would come over the face of human affairs!"

The phrase "wheel" or "course of nature" means literally:

"the wheel of birth- that is, the wheel which is set in motion at birth, and which runs on through life.

It may be a matter of doubt whether this refers to successive generations, or to the course of individual life. The more literal sense would be that which refers to an individual: but perhaps the apostle meant to speak in a popular sense, and thought of the affairs of the world as they roll on from age to age, as all enkindled by the tongue, keeping the world in a constant blaze of excitement.

Whether applied to an individual life, or to the world at large, everyone can see the justice of the comparison. One naturally thinks, when this expression is used, of a chariot driven on with so much speed that its wheels by their rapid motion become self- ignited, and the chariot moves amidst flames."

So James tells us that it is because of the tongue that the evil influences of hell spread like fire through every area of life. So Proverbs 10:18-21 from which James draws advises us:

"He that hideth hatred with lying lips, and he that uttereth a slander, is a fool.

In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin: but he that refraineth his lips is wise.

The tongue of the just is as choice silver: but the heart of the wicked is little worth.

The lips of the righteous feed many: but fools die for want of wisdom."

And again we read in Proverbs 26:18-19, "Like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows, and death, is the man who deceives his neighbor, and says, "I was only joking!"

Proverbs 18:21 states: "Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit."

Of course, Solomon warned us in Ecclesiastes 5:6 "Suffer not thy mouth to cause by flesh to sin."

The tongue draws men into all kinds of destructive and terrible situations. The forces of hell promote the 'fire' of the tongue and inflame its diabolical schemes. This is no wonder, for the devil himself is called a liar and an accuser of the brethren, so one would expect the devil to use men's tongues to make trouble for the innocent, for by that they bring the fire of hell to men.

Verse 7-8. James reminds us that the tongue is extremely difficult to control. It is an unruly evil. It cannot be restrained or silenced and nothing but the grace of God can bring it under control. The tongue cannot be restrained for it is evil and there is no human government that can bring it under restraint.

It can deliver deadly poison. Here James is thinking of the slanderer, the backbiter, the whisperer, the talebearer, and the accusers. These are more dangerous than the poison of snakes for they take away the life, peace, and reputation of men.

Man has tamed and brought all kinds of animal life under his control; teaching and controlling lions, elephants, birds like parrots speak and sing, training tigers, charming snakes, training dolphins things to do tricks. But though the animal kingdom can be tamed, men have never been successful in taming the tongue.

There is a true to life but amusing story one writer quotes:

"A woman came to John Wesley and said she knew what her talent was. "I think my talent from God is to speak my mind". Wesley replied, "I don't think God would mind if you buried that talent". Speaking forth everything that comes to mind is unwise, poisonous speech".

Verse 9. The tongue is most inconsistent in its behavior. Men bless God the Father with the tongue and then they turn around and with the same tongue curse men who are made in the image of God. We just previously studied the lesson where the Apostle Peter obeyed and spoke the revelation given him by the Father declaring that Jesus was Messiah, and then immediately thereafter used the same tongue to do the work of Satan (Matt. 16:13 – 23).

It is absurd to curse men who are made in the image of the Creator and then want to turn around to bless the Creator himself. It is important to note that many in Israel blessed the Father several times daily with their eighteen benedictions and like others when they called the name of God always added "blessed Be He". But of course they very quickly turn around and cursed men with the tongue.

Verse 10. Thus using the same tongue to bless and to curse is not only contrary to the will of God but to the natural order. One should not speak praises to God at the worship service and then afterwards abuse people verbally or otherwise at home, work, or any other place.

James is not amused by this behavior. He is telling us not to talk too much, not to boast, to discipline our speech, to control the tongue, not to gossip, not to insult, ridicule, slander or revile, but to change our habits of speech and to be gracious.

Verses 11-12.

The natural and consistent course in nature should be reflected in the Christian's conduct. The tongue should not be the instrument of conflicting emotion and sentiment.

Believers of God should consider it absurd to use their tongues in prayer and praise and then use them in cursing, slandering, and the like! If we bless God as our Father, it should teach us to speak well of, and kindly to, all who bear his image.

That tongue which addresses with reverence the divine Being cannot, without the greatest inconsistency, turn upon fellow-creatures with reviling brawling language. The tongue is to be used for the highest calling. It should consistently glorify God.

For men to reproach those who have not only the image of God in their natural faculties, but are renewed after the image of God by the grace of the gospel cannot in turn bring railing accusation to other men. The angels of God also follow a similar creed. To do otherwise would represent a shameful contradiction to all their pretensions of honouring the great Original. These things ought not so to be; and, if such considerations were always at hand, surely they would not be.

The Apostle shows that contrary effects from the same causes are monstrous, and not be found in nature, and therefore cannot be consistent with grace.

The comparisons are clear. A fountain cannot produce sweet water and bitter water. Salt water cannot be made sweet. A fig tree cannot produce olives, and a vine cannot produce figs. In the normal operation of nature some things just do not happen.

This of course specifically applies to the religious teachers who should not use their tongue dangerously. They should have the proper qualifications before they tried to wield power. Those who are teachers should be wise, discrete and pious. They should always operate according to the will of God.

CONCLUSION

James' exhortation stresses that believers must have knowledge and wisdom and their tongue must demonstrate those virtues. What is it that proves whether or not a person is wise and has knowledge?

Wisdom is not proved by intellectual knowledge but wisdom and understanding is shown by good conduct. Wisdom is shown by the meekness demonstrated in one's behaviour. A teacher needs wisdom which is defined as the ability to look at life from God's perspective. Understanding involves discerning, comprehending and perceiving the truth. One of the marks of wisdom is gentleness, which is literally the word used to describe a horse that has been broken and trained to submit to the bridle. It therefore represents strength under control.

The only controller by which a believer should be governed have is the Holy Spirit, and if under this control of divine authority, the tongue will be placed and kept under the control of God, so He can use it as He wishes. Wisdom is a moral matter.

It is necessary for a teacher to remain humble even if it is difficult. That state of mind and way of life should be consistent with a deportment led by the Spirit, and that is what "conversation" means. There should be a holy life, a holy walk, holy work, and holy speech.

Learning is important but it's of little worth if it does not teach someone how to humble themselves and to be proper and correct in their conduct toward others. Humility should be a necessary trait of the teacher.

Bitter envy and strife are not brought by God and these vices are not to be in the people of God. Self-promotion and lying means false teaching, which are naturally opposed to the truth. These traits are contrary to the meekness of wisdom and they cannot exist together in the same heart.

The bad attitudes rule out any boasting or glory, for the existence of these traits or motives make one unfit for the teaching office. Vain glorying and lying is not of God.

This kind of behavior, this so-called wisdom comes from the world and is demon-like; interested in deception, hypocrisy, and evil. It is animalistic for it seeks to gratify the passions. It is inspired by demons and kept in a person by demonic influence. This wisdom comes from beneath, rests on earthly principles and earthly motives. It is sensual for it indulges the flesh and fulfills the lusts and desires of the flesh. Being inspired by devils who are proud and who are against God, this wisdom is condemned by God.

God opposes every evil thing and where there is jealousy, personal ambition, envying and strife, we know that these definitely are not provided by the wisdom of God. This "wisdom" is devilish and not divine and those that possess it are doing the work of Satan. The source of much devilish evil is the tongue.

The 'fruit' of this earthly wisdom is confusion and every evil thing. That is what the devil produces, and his wisdom will produce evil. Whatever comes from the world will partake of

the spirit of the world. The world produces tumult, agitation, unsettledness, with no trust or confidence, and no stability in plan our purpose. Love and harmony are not part of what the world produces. It does not bring any lasting prosperity or progress in divine things.

In contrast the wisdom that God gives brings several good and great things. It is first pure; that is, free from defilement. It makes a man upright, holy, sincere, innocent, and chaste. It enlightens the intellect, purifies the heart, and makes the man do good. It will not lead to persecution instigated and led by evil erson, for it is a simple and peace-loving. It makes one want to live in peace with all others. It is gentle or considerate of others. It is often translated as moderation. It is in another passage translated as patient. That person is meek, modest, interpreting things in the best possible way.

There definitely is no partiality. That person is never controlled by their self-interest, worldly honor or the fear of men. It gives to every man what his due.

The wisdom of God produces righteousness, and the fruits are obvious. There is peace and joy. The virtues of God flourish.

Note that the idea is that when the Word of God is sown properly there is a harvest of righteousness. A controlled tongue filled with the praise of God and a rejection of evil is most necessary to the spiritual 'walk'.

Scriptures teach us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. It also teaches us that the Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and plenteous in mercy. James teaches true religion.

Clearly, the words that we use are extremely important in carrying out our ministry. It is not easy to control our tongues and therefore we should not be too ready to take on a teaching ministry. Instead, we should seek to master the control of this unruly member; for we are considered perfect if we do not offend by the misuse of our tongues.

The only one who can control our tongues is God and it is only He that gives us wisdom. We must however fulfill our ministry to which we are called. But the warning is that if we have the wisdom of God we will show it in humility, graciousness, and peace.

Anything or anyone that does not bear the fruits of good works will be condemned. So we with James and other writers, warn against unfruitful religion, unfruitful faith, and unfruitful wisdom.

We are commanded to teach and exhort only the things of God. This must be done conscientiously. God has given these gifts to those in the church for the benefit of the church and they must be used properly. Those who are doing the ministries of God will be recognized by their fruit. Those that are in ministries for which they are not fitted must take caution, go to God for wisdom and correction and so be pleasing to Him.

Self-controlled, Upright and Godly Faith

We must all remember that there will be a day of judgment and we will have to give an account for everything that we have been done. God is merciful. He wants us to change and do what is right. He is willing to help us. Above all, remember that we must be 'wise speakers'.

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