

James 3
Proverbs 10
Psalm 12

“Faith, Wisdom, and the Tongue”

February 25, 2018

Many of the proverbs have to do with the tongue.

As Proverbs 10:19 puts it,

“When words are many, transgression is not lacking,
but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.”

In the fifth century,

Hilary of Arles opened his comments on James in this way,
“Perfection consists of righteousness,
and silence is the way to achieve it.

This is why James connects perfection with keeping one’s mouth shut.” (37)

How often have you walked away from a conversation
wishing that you had kept your mouth shut?!

But no, you had to say it!

Our Psalm of response – Psalm 12 – deals with the fallout from the sins of the tongue.

Our only hope is the pure word of God –
that God himself will arise and deal with the vileness of this age!
And we sing Psalm 12 in the light of the Word who became flesh –
the one who has brought us into the safety that we had longed for!

Sing Psalm 12

Read James 3

Words.

The same person whose words encourage you and build you up –
can also use *words* to destroy you.

We saw last time that James warns us against thinking that mere words are sufficient.

If your brother is lacking in daily food or clothing –
then you must take *action*.

Simply saying, “be warmed, be filled – go in peace!”
is a travesty of justice.

Now, here in chapter 3, James goes a step further.

Our problem is worse than we thought it was!
Our problem is the *tongue*.

And James starts off with an admonition regarding teachers in the church:

1. Our Problem: the Tongue (v1-12)

a. The Centrality of the Tongue (v1-2)

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

Teachers will be judged with greater strictness.

This refers primarily to pastors –

but it also has broader application to all those who teach in the church.

Paul speaks of this in 1 Corinthians 3

when he talks about those who build on the foundation that the apostles have laid.

God will test their work with fire at the judgment.

Some build with gold, silver, precious stones – and their work will survive.

Others build with wood, hay, and stubble – and their work will perish,

but they themselves will be saved.

Paul is speaking of teachers – preachers – who build well or poorly.

James says the same thing.

“We who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”

Now it might appear that James doesn't say anything more about teachers in chapter 3, but I would suggest that the teacher – the pastor – remains central in James' mind throughout the rest of the chapter.

Indeed, I think Dan McCartney says rightly,

“Since teachers use the tongue, they are engaged in a dangerous enterprise, and only the mature person of humility, purity, gentleness, and sincerity (3:17) should engage in it.” (McCartney, 178)

But James is also writing for the whole church –

since all of us have the unfortunate habit of *speaking!*

² For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.

Some have thought that James is leaving open the possibility of sinless perfection in the second half of the verse –

but the first half of the verse makes it clear that this is not the case.

We *all* stumble in many ways.

And primary among these ways is the *tongue*.

b. Bits and Rudders – the Power of Small Things (v3-5a)

³ If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. ⁴ Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵ So also the tongue is a

small member, yet it boasts of great things.

Horses and ships.

This pretty much summarizes the things that people could steer in the ancient world.
Horsepower (or at least animal-power) and wind-power drove transportation in those days

Horses and ships are powerful – each in their own way.

If you control a horse’s mouth (the bit), you can direct it in the way that you wish.
If you control the rudder of a ship,
 you can harness the power of the wind according to the will of the pilot.

Every philosopher used these images to speak of how reason was supposed to govern the body.

But James does not say that *reason* governs us.
Rather, he says that the *tongue* governs us!

What happens to a ship if the captain wanders off?

With no hand on the rudder, a strong wind will soon capsize the ship –
 or run it aground!

In the same way, the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.

This borrows from Psalm 12 –
 which we sang earlier –
 those who used their tongues to seek to prevail over the helpless.

c. The Tongue Is a Fire – Set on Fire by Hell (v5b-6)

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life,^[a] and set on fire by hell.^[b]

At the end of verse 5, James switches over the image of *fire*.

Many languages use the same word for fire and for the tongue –
 “tongues” of flame, we say!
After all, flames flicker – make noise – and,
 when used improperly,
 cause great damage!

The tongue can inflame the body.

A small fire can set ablaze a great forest.

 We saw this last summer and fall in the western half of the country –
 massive fires that brought devastation and death!
It’s a fitting picture for the devastation and death that is brought by the tongue.

How powerful is the tongue?

Well, consider this:

if a married man has impure thoughts about a colleague at work,
but he restrains his *tongue* – and he never speaks of it –
then he will *never* have an affair.

*And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members,
staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life,^[a] and set on fire by hell.*

Think about what James is saying here.

This is a pretty harsh indictment of the tongue!

The tongue is a fire – a world of unrighteousness (a wicked world)!

The tongue *stains* the whole body.

(at the end of chapter 1, James had said that pure religion
consists in visiting orphans and widows

and keeping oneself *unstained* from the world).

Now we find out how the world *stains* us!

Through the tongue.

Some have suggested that James is using the body as a picture of the church.

In this way, the teacher is the “tongue” –

and James is particularly warning teachers of the peril of their calling!

I suspect that there may be a bit of truth in this.

Certainly there were false teachers in the first century –
setting churches on fire.

But while that may be a proper application of what James is saying,
his point includes the individual as well.

When James uses the phrase “setting on fire the entire course of life” –

the image is of something circular – like a race track –

so it easily lends itself to an image of something spinning out of control.

You know how this works!

You said something.

Maybe you meant well –

or well, if you are really honest with yourself,

you kinda wanted to make yourself look good...

So you said it.

Maybe you said it with a little too much smugness...

But she deserved it.

It was the truth...

Well, at least, it was mostly true –

if you understand it the way I intended it...

It's not my fault that he misinterpreted what I said!

But then he told her – and she told someone else –

and, well, you know, it got twisted around in the retelling...

Now she's not my friend anymore.

The tongue is a **fire**.

James uses a little hyperbole in verse 7:

d. The Untameability of the Tongue by Man (v7-8)

⁷ *For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind,* ⁸ *but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*

Seriously – *no one* has ever tamed a cat!!

The word that James uses here does not mean “tame” in the sense of “domesticate.”
Rather, it refers to being able to *subdue* or *control* the animal.
The whaler's harpoon “tames” the whale.

So he is not saying that every kind of animal or sea creature can be “domesticated.”
He is saying that every kind of creature can be *subdued*.

But no human being can tame the tongue.
You cannot subdue the tongue.
You cannot control it.

James had said in verse 2 that if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.

But now James says that this is not something that is humanly possible.
It takes mankind to tame an animal.
What then is required to tame the tongue?
Only God can do that!!

And then James changes the image again –
“it is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”

And you see the poison reflected in verses 9-10:

e. Blessing and Cursing (v9-12)

⁹ *With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.* ¹⁰ *From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers,^[c] these things ought not to be so.*

The same mouth blesses God and curses those who are made in the likeness of God.
The mouth

¹¹ Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water?

If you had a spring that sometimes produced fresh water,
and sometimes produced salt water,
that would be dangerous!

¹² Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

A tree will produce fruit in keeping with the sort of tree that it is.

So far, James 3 has not been all that encouraging!
James has told us that we cannot control the tongue –
it is a world of unrighteousness –
it is set on fire by hell –
and it sets everything else on fire as well!

But verse 12 begins to change direction.
After all, verse 11 suggested that the same opening
cannot produce both fresh and salt water.
And yet the tongue is untameable – so we must be in big trouble!

But verse 12 uses the image of the fig tree.
Jesus had cursed a fig tree – and it never bore figs again.
Or the grapevine –
Jesus said, “I am the vine, you are the branches...”

What is James doing with this?

2. God’s Solution: Wisdom from Above (v13-18)

Well, do you remember James’ opening statement?
“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers...”

So, given that the tongue is untameable by man –
given that the tongue is a world of unrighteousness –
set on fire by hell –
who should be a teacher?

“Since teachers use the tongue,
they are engaged in a dangerous enterprise,
and only the mature person of humility, purity, gentleness, and sincerity (3:17)
should engage in it.” (McCartney, 178)

What is the first thing you notice about the wise and understanding man of verse 13?
He doesn’t say anything!!

In the early 2nd century, Ignatius of Antioch wrote to the church in Ephesus and commended their bishop, Onesimus, for his *silence*. Many have thought this odd – since the bishop’s first task is *preaching!*

But over 20 years of pastoral ministry, I have learned that Ignatius has more wisdom than the rest of us! The *silence* of the bishop speaks volumes!

a. Humble Wisdom vs. Selfish Ambition (v13-14)

¹³ *Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.* ¹⁴ *But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.*

Verses 13-14 provide the basic contrast between humble wisdom and selfish ambition. And the most obvious difference is that humble wisdom is silently doing good deeds, while selfish ambition is chattering loudly!

Where words are many, sin is not absent.
If you are the sort who likes to talk,
take this to heart!
The tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things!
All your talk and chatter is simply revealing the straying of your heart.

Who is wise and understanding among you?
By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.

Very often Reformed churches look for their pastors and elders from among those who talk well!
We would do better if our pastors and elders talked less – and did more!

Remember 2:18 – “someone will say, you have faith, and I have works.
Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.”
That same theme comes back around now in chapter 3.

But let’s look a little more closely at the contrast that James gives us.

When you hear the term “meekness,” what do you think of?
Do you think of a pushover?
I hope not.
The meek man is one who has control of his temper.
Aristotle uses this word to refer to the virtue of meekness or gentleness.
Aristotle says that virtue is the *mean* between two extremes –
and meekness is the virtue between one who is short-tempered
and one who is apathetic.
In other words, the meek man is one who only gets angry at the right time,

and never gets angry at the wrong time.

But the meek man is contrasted

with the one who is driven by bitter jealousy and selfish ambition.

“Selfish ambition” is a desire to put oneself forward.

It is generally used of someone who is intriguing for office or political favors,
but it can be used of anyone who puts himself forward –
puts himself at the center.

Paul uses the same term in Philippians 2:3

“Do nothing from *rivalry* or conceit,
but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.”

I want you to think about this.

If you are supposed to consider others as more significant than yourself,
then how are you supposed to “get ahead” in life?

[sigh]

That merely shows how far we have fallen from God’s word!!

If *you* are supposed to consider others as more significant than *yourself*,
then that means that *others* will look out for you –
because *they* are considering *you* as more significant than *themselves*!

Of course, in a world driven by selfish ambition and bitter jealousies –
you may well be left behind by those who are climbing the corporate ladder!

But as Paul goes on to say in Philippians 2 –

“Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,
but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant,
being born in the likeness of men.

And being found in human form,
he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,
even death on a cross.

Therefore God has highly exalted him...”

Consider Jesus!

He did not put himself first.

He put *us* first –

trusting that his Father would take care of him!

And he calls us to have the same attitude – the same mindset –

so that we would consider the interests of others, rather than our own.

As I consider the course of my life –

I have to acknowledge that I have *too rarely* looked out for others.

But James says that the wise and understanding man is one who will show his works
in the meekness of wisdom!

Wisdom has to do with knowing how to live.

In much of the OT wisdom literature,
the focus is on the *search* for wisdom.

Get wisdom – pursue wisdom – where can you find wisdom?

These are the questions you often encounter in the OT.

But James does not set you on a quest for wisdom.

Rather, James already knows what wisdom is –
and he knows where to find it!

If you lack wisdom, all you have to do is ask – and God will give it to you! (1:5)

And James goes a step further.

He warns us that there is such a thing as “earthly” wisdom,
which, in fact, is demonic.

**b. The “Wisdom” of Putting Yourself First Is Demonic and Leads to Disorder
(v15-16)**

¹⁵ *This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.*

Earthly wisdom says “put yourself first.”

“Look out for #1”

“Just be you.”

“Follow your heart.”

James says that this is not just “earthly” – but “unspiritual” – even “demonic.”

The term translated “unspiritual” is the word “soul-ish.”

It is characterized by *soul* – not by *spirit*.

Throughout the NT, those who are “soul-ish” – those who are characterized by “soul”
are those who lack the Spirit of God.

Dan McCartney suggests we should translate it “self-ish,”

because the focus is on advancing one’s own earthly personal welfare.

Earthly wisdom – selfish wisdom – is ultimately *demonic* wisdom.

In chapter 2, even the demons believe that God is one – and tremble!

Now we hear of a demonic wisdom that urges us to put ourselves first!

In OT wisdom literature, you never hear about “false” wisdom.

The contrast is always between *wisdom* and *folly*.

But James wants you to see that *folly* will portray herself in the garb of wisdom!

There is a counterfeit wisdom that may sound good –
it may make sense to our *souls*!

“Just be you – follow your heart – look out for #1”

But earthly wisdom is rooted in jealousy.
Putting yourself first is the ultimate form of jealousy.
God says that you are to love your neighbor as yourself.
You are to consider others as better than yourself.
But we are jealous – and we *want* what rightly belongs to others!

But what is the result?

¹⁶ For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

What has been the result of putting myself first?
Disorder and every vile practice!
You see this everywhere in our society.
If me and my happiness is center of my life,
then disorder and every vile practice will follow!

What happens when you put yourself first?
What happens when you are selfish?
We become out of sync with the universe that God made.
Disorder – and every vile practice.

The opioid epidemic has resulted from the selfish ambition of the drug companies,
blended with the searing pain – the disorder and every vile practice –
of the modern world.

In contrast, the wisdom from above has a very different trajectory:

c. The Wisdom from Above Is Pure, Peaceable, and Leads to a Harvest of Righteousness (v17-18)

¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

Earthly, soulish, demonic wisdom is all about *me* –
and it only relates to others insofar as others are about me too!
But the wisdom from above is primarily directed towards others.

But before we get to all those outward directed aspects of the heavenly wisdom,
we need to start where James does!

The wisdom from above is first *pure*.
“The purity that comes from belonging to God is the fount
from which other goodness flows.” (McCartney, 201)
You will notice that the characteristics given in verse 17
are not the characteristics of *wisdom*, but of the one who *has* wisdom.
We are going back to verse 13 here –

“Who is wise and understanding among you?”

The one who is characterized by the wisdom that is from above –
the *pure* wisdom of God.

(Indeed, many have noted that James doesn’t say much about the Holy Spirit –
but when he talks about *Wisdom* he seems to speak of Wisdom
doing the same things that the Spirit does for Paul!)

He is peaceable, gentle, open to reason.

This describes the disposition of the wise.

In other words, if you are wise, then you will be considerate of others –
you will seek peace and pursue it –

you will defer to others – preferring their good to your own.

He is full of mercy (not just a feeling of pity – but the act of showing mercy to those in need!)
and good fruits (focusing on the *action* of the wise).

Augustine speaks of how we go to the theater and weep over a play,
and we go home, thinking that we are merciful people!

And as we go, we pass by a truly miserable person –

but we don’t notice – because we have satisfied our mercy at the theater!

James would say that is the demonic – selfish wisdom of the world!

It has been a joy to watch so many of you grow in showing mercy!

The way that you look out for one another is such an encouragement to my heart!

And the wise man is impartial and sincere –

words that highlight the enduring constancy of the wise.

The wise man is impartial – or unwavering.

McCartney points out that this word contrasts with the “double-minded man”
of chapter 1.

The one who trusts God – the one who believes God –

will be single-minded – unwavering in love for God and neighbor.

And likewise, the wise man is sincere.

He does not say one thing – but mean another.

And even as the selfish, demonic wisdom produces a harvest in keeping with its source –
“disorder and every vile practice,”

so also the wisdom from above produces a harvest in keeping with *its* source:

¹⁸ *And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.*

In contrast to disorder, we see righteousness –

a well-ordered community – a community where we are rightly related to God and others.

And in contrast to every vile practice, there is *Shalom* – peace.

There is well-being – there is harmony between us –
because we have *not* been seeking our own selfish pleasures!
We have been seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness!