

James
Chapter Three
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Test 6: The Test of the Tongue (3:1-12)

James 3:1 “Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment.

James 3:2 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.

The first verse is one that we teachers think about a lot and tremble when we do think about it because we all do stumble in many ways. No man is perfect, but teachers of the Word of God must be especially careful in what we say and write. I am responsible for teaching the truth and I have to be very careful that the truth that I teach is indeed the Truth of God and not some wrong permutation of the truth from my mind. A verse that seems to correlate with this teaching of James is that of Jesus that is reported in three gospel books:

Matt 18:6 “but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea.”

Mark 9:42 “And whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble, it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea.”

Luke 17:2 “It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should cause one of these little ones to stumble.”

Any wrong teaching that we teach could cause someone to stumble so I certainly must teach with fear and trembling that I am letting myself be properly led by the Holy Spirit.

James 3:3 Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they may obey us, we direct their entire body as well.

James 3:4 Behold, 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.

James 3:5 So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. Behold, how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!

James 3:6 And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell.

James 3:7 For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed, and has been tamed by the human race.

James 3:8 But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.”

The tongue and the fingers that type an email are similar tools the improper use of which can ruin our profession of faith before the world. Many an email I wish that I could retrieve and many a word I wish that I could take back. Both errors are usually made when I am in a heightened emotional state so my rule one should be never speak or send an email when I am in a state of increased adrenaline. With an email I can at least compose it and then save it and look at it again in a few days. With the spoken word I just need to somehow stall and one way that I can do that is to say "Let me get back to you on that" and such a reply would save me in most situations. I just need to program myself to automatically make those two responses. Another verbal stall would be to just say nothing and I am pretty good at saying nothing, but often some sort of response is necessary. In both the written and the spoken word we Christians must make it a habit to listen to the wisdom of the Holy Spirit by praying before answering. Sometimes we can also immediately apologize for an inappropriate response and ask for forgiveness. Often a contrite spirit will turn away wrath and improve our interaction with others.

God is very clear about the necessity of His followers having a contrite heart:

Psa 51:17 "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise."

Isa 57:15 "For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, "I dwell on a high and holy place, And also with the contrite and lowly of spirit In order to revive the spirit of the lowly And to revive the heart of the contrite."

Isa 66:2 "For My hand made all these things, Thus all these things came into being," declares the Lord. "But to this one I will look, To him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word."

Jer 44:10 "But they have not become contrite even to this day, nor have they feared nor walked in My law or My statutes, which I have set before you and before your fathers."

When we realize that we are a temple of the Lord, we can consider our interactions with other people to be proper when we think about how God wants His children to interact with Him.

Acts 17:24 "The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands;"

1Cor 3:16 "Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?"

1Cor 3:17 If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are."

The temple of God must not be involved in misrepresenting the Holy God. We can also think about correlating our output with the output of trees:

Matt 7:17 "Even so, every good tree bears good fruit; but the bad tree bears bad fruit.

Matt 7:18 A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit.

Matt 7:19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Since we are now simultaneously sinless and sinners in our transitional state of development here on earth, we will occasionally produce bad fruit. Certainly Matt 7:19 does compare to what will happen to us at the final judgment if we never bear good fruit, but we also know that God knows that we are not in our perfect state here and our sins of misuse of the written and spoken word are part of our sins that have been paid for by Jesus. We are however known by our fruit and if we never bear good fruit then we are a briar bush and will be cast into the fire.

Luke 6:44 “For each tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they pick grapes from a briar bush.”

But we must remember that our works here in our developmental state (during sanctification) will be properly judged by The Judge:

1Cor3:12 “Now if any man builds upon the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw,

1Cor 3:13 each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work.

1Cor 3:14 If any man's work which he has built upon it remains, he shall receive a reward.

1Cor 3:15 If any man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire.”

I think that the above verses are enough to keep us humble and to help us pay close attention to the teachings of James about our works.

James 3:5 tells us something of the terrible consequences of the actions of our little tongue as what we say spreads among all of the many people through whom the words are spread and as they are permuted by the carriers of the words. We can picture a lot of dominoes set up so that an initial push makes them all fall in a prearranged manner. In a similar manner our speech will spread among many people and our witness as a disciple of Jesus Christ will have to be repaired as much as possible. I used to pridefully say that I did not care what people thought about me, but such a statement is really very immature and demonstrates a failure to understand that our witness for Jesus Christ is often a function of what people think about us and such is certainly influenced by what we say and write.

James 3:7-8 ends on a rather depressing note, and certainly no human can tame his tongue by himself. Taming the tongue requires intervention by the Master tamer Who tames His disciples' tongues as part of the sanctification process. Only God can tame the tongue of a human being. God created us and He can tame us.

James 3:9 “With it we bless our Lord and Father; and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God;

James 3:10 from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.

James 3:11 Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water?

James 3:12 Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Neither can salt water produce fresh."

What in the world is going on with our tongue? It is not supposed to behave in a way contrary to a fresh fountain and it should not be able to behave in the other ways mentioned above. Well, we know enough from our studies of Romans and Ephesians to know that the problem with our tongue is that indeed it is still "of this world". It seems that the sanctification process affects our tongue last of all! From Romans chapter 3 we clearly read the problem:

Rom 3:9 "What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin;

Rom 3:10 as it is written, "There is none righteous, not even one;

Rom 3:11 There is none who understands, There is none who seeks for God;

Rom 3:12 All have turned aside, together they have become useless; There is none who does good, There is not even one. "

Rom 3:13 "Their throat is an open grave, With their tongues they keep deceiving," "The poison of asps is under their lips";

Rom 3:14 "Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness";

Rom 3:15 "Their feet are swift to shed blood,

Rom 3:16 Destruction and misery are in their paths,

Rom 3:17 And the path of peace have they not known. "

Rom 3:18 "There is no fear of God before their eyes.""

This reason is not satisfying to us for as a child of God I want all of my being to be sanctified for function in the world for Him. But I still see what is still inside of me being working out in the world and, even though I now hate it, it still comes forth. It even does not help me to know that I am in good company:

Rom 7:14 "For we know that the Law is spiritual; but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.

Rom 7:15 For that which I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate.

Rom 7:16 But if I do the very thing I do not wish to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that it is good.

Rom 7:17 So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which indwells me.

Rom 7:18 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the wishing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not.

Rom 7:19 For the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish.

Rom 7:20 But if I am doing the very thing I do not wish, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.

Rom 7:21 I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wishes to do good.

*Rom 7:22 For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man,
Rom 7:23 but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.
Rom 7:24 Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?
Rom 7:25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.
Rom 8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”*

I can only cry out “come, Lord Jesus!” as I say amen to the last words in our Word from the Father:

Rev 22:20 “He who testifies to these things says, “Yes, I am coming quickly.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.”

One day I will be truly free of the sin nature that will live as long I as continue to physiologically function here. Some of my fellow Christians just have a two-word saying that comforts us mightily: “One day!”

VII. The Test of Humble Wisdom (3:13-18)

James 3:13 “Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom.

James 3:14 But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth.

James 3:15 This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic.

There are two kinds of ambition in the hearts of God’s children. One is the kind that we want to have **always working** as the default ambition:

2Cor 5:9 “Therefore also we have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him.”

1Thes 4:11 “and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you;”

The other kind of ambition is what we have to fight **against** all of our “natural” lives here:

Phil 1:17 “the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment.”

James 3:14 “But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth.

James 3:16 For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing.”

We see from Philippians that there are false brothers who are actually proclaiming Jesus Christ before the world but they do this out of the ambition that comes from Satan and is still present in our minds as we fight the good fight. This part of our sin nature we see is earthly, natural, and demonic. No child of God wants to see this kind of ambition raise its ugly head in our life but, if we are honest and truly look into God's mirror, we recognize it coming forth from our natural being. Paul was imprisoned for properly proclaiming the words of Jesus Christ before the world and these false brethren were saying that he was proclaiming a false Christ as they tried to cause him sorrow heaped upon sorrow while he suffered in prison for truly representing Jesus Christ.

I think that we see this type of activity today when people are criticizing Christians as they suffer at the hands of an intolerant society which will not accept the Christians who stand for righteousness as defined by the Word of God. As some orthodox Christians say in love that we must declare homosexuality a sin there are other "Christians" who throw stones at the orthodox Christians as they say that the Bible must not be taken so literally. The criticizing "Christians" are showing forth their selfish ambition as they try to appeal to the world for their acceptance as they say that the Bible-believing Christians are misled. Today we see so many "Christian" organizations making their group as appealing to the world as they can. There is only one standard for the true church to hold up for the basis for all ethics and that is the Bible. Whenever we try to make the Bible more appealing to the world by bending its standards we get into big trouble.

I think that it is time for us to call a snake a snake and a rock a rock rather than trying to make a snake look like a fish and a rock look like a piece of bread. What am I talking about? I am just amplifying on what Jesus told us:

Matt 7:9 "Or what man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will he give him a stone?"

Matt 7:10 "Or if he shall ask for a fish, will he not give him a snake, will he?"

Matt 7:11 "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!"

Matt 7:12 "Therefore, however you want people to treat you, so treat them, for this is the Law and the Prophets."

People need bread and fish even though they look at snakes and rocks and think that such are bread and fish. Many churches today are trying to appeal to the world by making their "services" more crowd friendly, but if they do not worship God in the way that He tells us then we are saying that we are a church (the bread or the fish) but we really are offering them a substitute church, which is really a rock or a snake. People in their natural states are not able to discern a spiritual snake or rock. The natural man wants worldly music and pop psychiatry and "feel-good" messages but such are not what he really needs. The world does not naturally want to hear the Word of God preached as the Truth. Jesus said that the truth would set us free and we must declare that the Word of God is that truth. As James reminds us, we must proclaim this truth with humility as we realize that certainly we still have the old sin nature within us and it is easy for us to get "carried away" in our desire to want to have many friends.

The two words “carried away” are worthy of a study also as I remember us warning our son to not be carried away:

Gal 2:13 “And the rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy.”

Heb 13:9 “Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings; for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, through which those who were thus occupied were not benefited.”

James 1:14 “But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust.”

2Peter 3:17 “You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard lest, being carried away by the error of unprincipled men, you fall from your own steadfastness,”

It is an important part of our sanctification process to meditate on the four verses above. We have already studied the James verse as we saw that our main source of temptation is our own lust. I hear some people say that their problem is Satan who keeps attacking them but I don't think that Satan has to be involved with most people at that level: “We have met the enemy and he is us!” I cause myself so much trouble that Satan can just pass by and smile. Think about that statement a bit and see if you can apply it to yourself. It has to be terribly embarrassing to realize that we cause ourselves so much grief as we give in to our lust so often.

James 3:16 For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing.

James 3:17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy.

James 3:18 And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”

God is the source of order and Satan is the source of disorder. I remember talking to my thermodynamics classes some about Gibbs free energy and entropy. A natural direction of nature is that every system tends to go toward maximum entropy and entropy is given the symbol “S” and is a measure of the disorder of the system. The Gibbs free energy is $G = H - TS$, note the symbol “G”. To overcome the natural tendency toward disorder one has to increase the “H” (enthalpy which is $E + PV$, where E is the energy) or the energy. It take positive work to overcome the entropy effect. There is a lot of spiritual truth in thermodynamics and I would sometimes briefly mention such without being brought before the tribunal for “preaching” in a secular university.

On the spiritual side disorder is made manifest by jealousy and selfish ambition appearing in our lives. To overcome this natural tendency in our being we have to put forward work to put down that disorder so that the jealousy and selfish ambition will cease to appear. I often “preach” to classes that it is extremely important to distinguish between cause and effect. I can also preach here that it is critical for us to understand that disorder and every evil thing are the causes and the effects are the observables jealousy

and selfish ambition. I am not saying that Satan is the cause of our troubles but I am saying that our sin nature contains the disorder and every evil thing within it (read the Romans 3 verses above again). If we only try to put away the jealousy and selfish ambition that we easily see we are not hitting the correct target. We need to focus on the disorder and every evil thing that is still working within us and the jealousy and selfish ambition will then cease to be seen so often.

As I said above, it is time for the true Christians to call a snake a snake and a rock a rock. We must not try to offer natural man a snake disguised as a fish. Paul warned us that there would be a time when people would naturally choose to have their ears tickled:

2Tim 4:3 “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires;”

Certainly this time has been here for some time and it is here now also. Part of the responsibility of the true children of God is not to water down the message and not to compromise the teaching of Jesus with the “wisdom” of the world. We must offer people the uncompromised truth of Jesus Christ and rid ourselves of the natural disorder and every evil thing that is still with us in our sinful nature. It is time for the true church to stand up for the true Word of God and to only offer worship and praise to Him as He tells us to do so in the Word.

References

1. All Bible quotations are from the New American Standard Bible, Moody Press, 1975.
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3. Geoffrey W. Bromley, The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Volume II, Erdmans Publishing Company, 1982.
4. Frank E. Gaebelin, “The Expositor’s Bible Commentary”, Zondervan Publishing House, 1981.
5. David P. Scaer, “James the Apostle of FAITH”, Corcordia Publishing House, 1983.