

## **“Control Your Tongue” James 3:1-18**

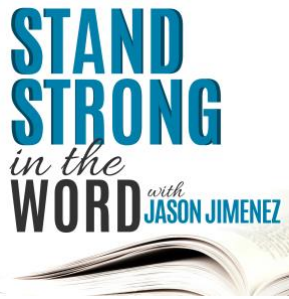
In 3:1-12, James returns to discuss the tongue. A topic he mentioned in 1:19, “Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger,” and 1:26, “If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.”

### **I. The Power of the Tongue (3:1-6)**

1. ***Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.*** Many in the early church were becoming leaders hastily or for the wrong reasons. ***Be judged with greater strictness***—Leaders are not only responsible for themselves but to every single person who looks to them for guidance, training, and direction. Leaders will be judged by how they live and what they teach. Therefore, James is cautioning the church not to promote a person to leadership without first confirming they are morally and theologically sound. Jesus provided a considerable amount of teaching on leaders who cause others to sin (see Matt. 5:19; 18:6; Lk. 12:42-48).

A. <sup>2</sup> ***For we all stumble*** (commit acts of sin) ***in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect*** (mature) ***man, able also to bridle his whole body.*** Every human being is born into sin. Therefore, every human being will sin with their mouth. Not even Moses (Ps. 106:33) or Paul (Ac. 23:5) were able to control their tongues. In vs. 3-6, James proceeds to demonstrate the power of the uncontrollable tongue with three analogies: a horse, a ship, and a forest fire.

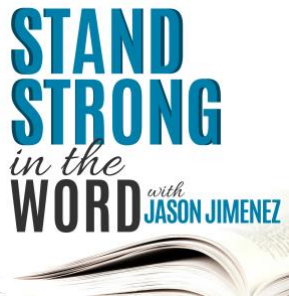
- 1) **Analogy #1: Strong Animal** - <sup>3</sup> ***If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well.*** It's amazing how a small bit in a horse's mouth can turn the whole animal in any direction. So too is the tongue. A little member that directs and controls the whole body.
- 2) **Analogy #2: Large Vessel** - <sup>4</sup> ***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.*** At the rear end of the ship is the rudder attached to the tiller. This little piece is capable of maneuvering a large ship.



- B. **Analogy #3: Forest Fire** - <sup>5</sup> *So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!* From a small source (the mouth) comes powerful things. Just like a tiny spark can eventually turn into a massive forest fire and destroy thousands of acres; so too can a few words destroy countless lives. You can say something inspirational that will “fire up” a person—or, you can say hurtful things that will “burn up” a person’s hopes and dreams.
- C. <sup>6</sup> *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* (“wheel of life”), *and set on fire by hell* (Gk., *Gehenna*; “Valley of Hinnom”). The destructive behavior of the tongue can get out of control very quickly and destroy every aspect of life. Solomon writes, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits” (Pro. 18:21). **fire by hell**—James traces the source of the tongue’s evil is from hell (3:14-15). Jesus affirmed, “What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person” (Matt. 15:18). *Vine’s Expository Bible Notes*, “Our tongues can burn like a raging fire (Prov. 16:27). Surely fire is a good servant; its heat has many beneficial uses. But fire is a bad master if it is not controlled. Fire cooks our meals and warms our bodies. It also has the power to kill, maim, and destroy. A few misused words can ignite a raging controversy. In fact, he says the tongue gets its destructive power from hell itself (James 3:6).”

## II. The Inconsistency and Perversity of the Tongue (3:7-12)

- <sup>7</sup> *For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, <sup>8</sup> but no human being can tame* (subdue) *the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.* God has given us dominion over animals; and yet, James is saying we can’t subdue our own tongues (v. 2). **Restless evil**—Our natural, physical state was born in sin and are flesh is constantly raging against the spirit. Galatians 5:16-17, “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.”

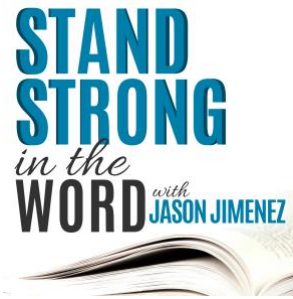


2. <sup>9</sup> *With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.* <sup>10</sup> *From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.* Because human beings are made in the image of God, they are able to acknowledge God and honor His name. However, because human beings are born in sin—they too will say sinful things that dishonor God. In 4:11-12, James writes, “Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. <sup>12</sup> There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?”

- A. **Analogy #4: Nature** <sup>11</sup> *Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh (sweet) and salt (bitter) water?* <sup>12</sup> *Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.* James draws from the Jordan Valley to illustrate his point about the nature of the tongue. A pure water source will replenish your body and a bitter source is dangerous to your well-being. **Fig tree**—A plant produces fruit according to its nature. Therefore, what James is driving home is a person in the Spirit, will speak truth and love; and a person in the flesh will spew lies and hate. *NKJV Study Bible*, “Pouring salt water into fresh produces salt water; and mixing bad fruit with good fruit produces a bushel of rotten fruit. Likewise, mixing the contradictory speech of blessing and cursing will only produce negative results.”
- B. Proverbs 10:11, “The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence.”
- C. Psalm 39:1, “I said, “I will guard my ways that I may not sin with my tongue; I will muzzle my mouth while the wicked are in my presence.”

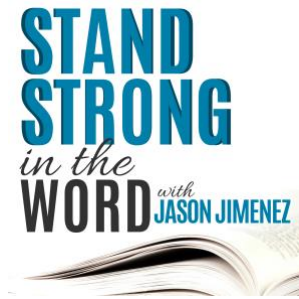
### III. The Pursuit of Heavenly Wisdom (3:13-18)

1. <sup>13</sup> *Who is wise* (practical Christian living) *and understanding* (to professionally apply your skill to practical manners) *among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness* (humility; gentleness) *of wisdom.* James returns to exhorting Christians to pursue wisdom (1:5) and contrasts between earthly wisdom (vs. 14-16) and heavenly wisdom (vs. 17-18). **Wise and understanding**—James poses a challenging question by employing a technical phrase applied to teachers and



rabbis. He does so to measure a wise person on account of their good conduct. **Let him show his works**—A Christian who lives out their faith is someone who is full of wisdom, thoughtful and resourceful, and gentle to others. **Meekness**—The Greek word describes a horse who has been broken into submission by the bridle (1:21). The term conveys a meditative and active acceptance to respond in gentleness and with self-control. True faith produces good works and is conducted in humility (2:14-26). A beautiful picture of the “meekness of wisdom” is captured in the words of Jesus, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly at heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt. 11:29).

2. **14 But if you have bitter jealousy (envy) and selfish ambition (self-seeking; selfish-zeal) in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.** James offers a contrast to wisdom demonstrated by humility. **Bitter jealousy and selfish ambition**— The vices of the flesh: arrogance, jealousy, and selfishness are characteristics of Satan. The early Christians were priding themselves for knowing the truth and bitterly attacking one another out of envy. **Do not boast**—The leaders of the early church were boasting in their own wisdom and failing to teach God’s people his truth. **False to the truth**—Jesus said the Devil is the “Father of lies” (Jn. 8:44) and the great Tempter (Matt. 4:3). Paul describes Satan’s work as “leading others astray” (2 Cor. 11:13); and it’s quite extensive because John pronounces that the “whole world is under the control of the evil one” (1 Jn. 5:19).
  - A. **15 This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual (sensual), demonic.** James identifies the origin and nature of worldly wisdom. **Earthly**—To be impure and at odds with God. **Unspiritual**—To lack a connection with God. **Demonic**—The Greek word is *daimoniodes* and is used nowhere else in Scripture. The rendering seems to convey being under the influence or direction of demons. 1 Tim. 4:1, “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons.”
  - B. **16 For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.** Selfish behavior and pursuits only produce further chaos, disputes, and confusion.
3. **17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.** True wisdom reflects the nature of God. **Pure**—free from defilement; the absence of any motive to sin. **Peaceable**—a spirit of calmness that builds harmony; non-combative. **Gentle**—to be considerate and lenient to others. **Open to**



**reason**—to yield or submit to correction; to not be self-seeking. **Full of mercy and good fruits**—to be sympathize and serve others with joy (2:13). **Impartial and sincere**—to be honest and genuine in speech and in conduct.

- A. Proverbs 3:13-18: Blessed is the one who finds wisdom,  
and the one who gets understanding,  
<sup>14</sup> for the gain from her is better than gain from silver  
and her profit better than gold.  
<sup>15</sup> She is more precious than jewels,  
and nothing you desire can compare with her.  
<sup>16</sup> Long life is in her right hand;  
in her left hand are riches and honor.  
<sup>17</sup> Her ways are ways of pleasantness,  
and all her paths are peace.  
<sup>18</sup> She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her;  
those who hold her fast are called blessed.
4. <sup>18</sup> **And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.** James's closing statement is similar to what Jesus said in Matt. 5:9, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God." A wise person who controls their tongue and seeks wisdom from God will produce spiritual peace (see 2:14-20; Gal. 5:16-25; Phil. 1:11).