

- 1) The title in some translations for this section of James is “**The Tongue Is a Fire**”
- 2) Here in chapter 3, James continues to emphasize the importance of controlling what we say and how influential and/or destructive our words can be.
- 3) He begins by speaking about teachers.

James 3:1–2 (NASB 2020)

The Tongue Is a Fire

¹Do not become teachers in large numbers, my brothers, since you know that we *who are teachers* will incur a stricter judgment. ²For we all stumble in many *ways*. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to rein in the whole body as well.

- 4) First, James’ idea here is not that they or we should fear being a teacher but rather they should be mindful of the responsibility that comes along with it.
- 5) As always, it is important to grasp the context of the times in which James is writing before we can perhaps totally understand why he is saying what he is saying and the impact of it.
- 6) In the Jewish culture there was no higher calling for a child than to become a rabbi – a teacher.
- 7) Teachers were very important in the early church as well.
- 8) The big difference in the Jewish mindset and that of the early church was the status.
 - a) The Jewish perspective was all about status of the position.
- 9) Jesus addresses the proper attitude part of this in talking to the disciples about the wrong attitudes of the scribes and pharisees...

Matthew 23:2–7 (NASB 2020)

²... “The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses. ³Therefore, whatever they tell you, do and comply with it all, but do not do as they do; for they say *things* and do not do *them*. ⁴And they tie up heavy burdens and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with *so much as* their finger. ⁵And they do all their deeds to be noticed by *other* people; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels *of their garments*. ⁶And they love the place of honor at banquets, and the seats of honor in the synagogues, ⁷and personal greetings in the marketplaces, and being called Rabbi by the people.

- 10) Obviously, Jesus is saying their attitude is not as it should be.
 - a) I don’t think he is saying that these men are all totally bad, but it is again their selfish pride that He is calling into question.
- 11) On the other hand, Paul clearly tells us in his letter to the Ephesians what our purpose should be as teachers.

Ephesians 4:11–13 (NASB 2020)

¹¹And He gave some *as* apostles, some *as* prophets, some *as* evangelists, some *as* pastors and teachers, ¹²for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ; ¹³until we all attain to the unity of the faith,

and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.

- 12) As teachers in the early church and carrying onward to today the primary concern is not status but as Paul states clearly, three purposes:
 - a) Equipping the saints for the work of the ministry.
 - b) Building up the body of Christ.
 - c) Final goal is to attain unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God.
 - d) That in turns leads us to maturity and to fullness of Christ.
- 13) Now, to connect some dots that might not really be connected but I think definitely can be without much of a stretch.
 - a) As Paul states in the letters, to the Phillipians and the Galatians we are to “live as Christ”.
 - b) Perhaps that’s what he is really saying by the phrase “leads us to maturity and to the fullness of Christ”.
 - c) Teachers cannot open our skulls and pour any of that in to make it happen.
 - d) However, they can and should do everything in their power by solid teaching of the Word and its connections to our everyday lives, ensure that process continues.
- 14) As teachers and individuals this should be our purpose whether we are standing behind a podium in a classroom, at a pulpit in an auditorium, or sitting with a friend in conversation about scripture at a coffee shop on Hulen.
- 15) We must never tear down, cause dissension, or be divisive.
- 16) All the apostles by definition had to be teachers and as teachers they were promised that they would be guided by the Holy Spirit and given remembrance of all they would need.
 - a) They were to be “passers on” of the teachings of the master teacher – Christ Himself under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- 17) We as teachers today should also be under the guidance of the Holy Spirit if we will let ourselves be.
- 18) There are many other ways teachers can go astray besides wanting status ...
 - a) In 1 Timothy Paul talks about teachers who wanted to teach but did not understand and were making confident and incorrect assertions. 1 Timothy 1:6–7
 - b) In 2 Timothy he talks about teachers who are basically coerced into teaching what their students wanted to hear. 2 Timothy 4:3–4
 - c) In Titus Paul speaks of teachers teaching things for dishonest gain Titus 1:10–11.
 - i) And of course, in many places we are taught to beware of false teachers – those teaching another gospel, the Judaizers, etc.
- 19) James then says in verse 2...

² For we all stumble in many *ways*. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to rein in the whole body as well.

- a) I think James steps away from the specificity of teachers here.

James – Faith Demonstrated – 2025

- b) He knows that we all make mistakes, and I personally think he is saying here – you are not perfect but take seriously the job that is before you.
- 20) The conclusion we should draw here in all this is not just for those who are “formally teaching”.
- a) Anytime we as individuals are in conversation about God’s word, we are basically teaching and must take care.
- 1) This last verse becomes a springboard for James’ next topic – *small things controlling large things*...

James 3:3–5a (NASB 2020)

³Now if we put the bits into the horses’ mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their whole body as well. ⁴Look at the ships too: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are *nevertheless* directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot determines. ⁵So also the tongue is a small part *of the body*, and *yet* it boasts of great things.

- 2) What James is doing here, in fact, all the way from verse 1 through verse 12 harks back to chapter 1 verse 19
- ¹⁹ *You know this*, my beloved brothers *and sisters*. Now everyone *must be* quick to hear, slow to speak, *and* slow to anger
- 3) Verse 5 clearly says that the tongue is small, yet it has the power to do great things (or NOT).
- a) If not controlled it can cause great hurt and personal injury to others
 - i) Broken hearts, spirits, damaged reputations, loss of jobs, broken friendships, and even broken families.
 - ii) That’s a lot for such a small part of our bodies.
 - b) It can direct individuals and large groups in the wrong direction, even putting their souls in jeopardy.
- 4) All of this of course is really not the tongue (the tiny part of the body) that is actually doing the “BAD STUFF”.
- a) Instead, it is the mind and heart which are behind that small organ that is the real problem.
 - b) No different than the hand on the rudder or the hand controlling the bridle.
 - i) It is the mind and heart of the person who owns the hand that is making the guiding decisions.
- 5) Our solution is not to wear a gag so that we cannot talk – our solution is to control the heart and mind and make what the tongue does right.
- a) If the mind and heart are not thinking right – i.e. not under control of Christ and the Holy Spirit – then BAD THINGS WILL COME FROM IT!!!
- 6) Continuing with the rest of verse 5 through 12...

James 3:5b–12 (NASB 2020)

See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire, the *very* world of unrighteousness; the tongue is set among our body's parts as that which defiles the whole body and sets on fire the course of *our* life, and is set on fire by hell. 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. ⁸ But no one *among* mankind can tame the tongue; *it is* a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless *our* Lord and Father, and with it we curse people, who have been made in the likeness of God; ¹⁰ from the same mouth come *both* blessing and cursing. My brothers *and sisters*, these things should not be this way. ¹¹ Does a spring send out from the same opening *both* fresh and bitter *water*? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brothers *and sisters*, bear olives, or a vine *bear* figs? Nor *can* saltwater produce fresh.

7) Examples – one after another – all showing how seriously we should take this whole idea of control of our tongues.

8) One in particular is his first example.

- a) I see in this the possibility that James is talking about gossip though it does not have to be.
 - i) In past months and years, we have seen the results of forest fires; the total devastation they can cause.
 - ii) So many times, these are started by the smallest ember, a lit cigarette, or the careless toss of a match that was presumed to be out.
 - iii) The idea here is that the amount of destruction and devastation that can be caused by our words is serious.
- b) It is not the quantity of words that we say sometimes that is the problem – it can be a single sentence, perhaps a single word.
- c) Then the consequences become much larger – the small flame and the forest fire.
- d) A wrong word spoken in haste can, as we discussed a bit ago, cause massive amounts of pain in a person's life.
 - i) Boyd Carpenter in his book “The Wisdom of James the Just” made the comment:

“For the tongue often outruns thought”¹⁰

9) I know I have shared this with you before, but it seems appropriate to do so once more.

- a) James is in good company with feeling and teaching as he has here.
- b) Jesus speaks to the absolute seriousness of this same situation and its eternal consequences.

Matthew 12:36–37 (NASB 2020)

³⁶ But I tell you that *for every careless word that people speak, they will give an account of it on the day of judgment.* ³⁷ For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

10) I know this is a hard subject for us to look at this deeply, but it is really one of the things that James features in this letter which are absolutely part **of faith demonstrated!**

¹⁰ W. Boyd Carpenter, [*The Wisdom of James the Just*](#) (New York: Thomas Whittaker, 1903), 192.

James – Faith Demonstrated – 2025

11) We have talked about the bad stuff the tongue can do. So, let's brainstorm for a minute.

What are some things the tongue can do that are right and proper? (let's name as many as we can)

- a) Praise, prayer, encouragement, comfort, right teaching,
- 12) Obviously, our goal should be to make as many of these good things a part of our lives as we can and, at the same time, eliminate as many of the bad things associated with the tongue as we can.

1) James now switches topics once more. In this next passage he speaks of wisdom and the source of wisdom.

2) Before we read this passage, let's get your ideas of exactly what wisdom is.

Oxford Dictionary = the quality of having experience, knowledge, and good judgment; the quality of being wise.

Webster = wisdom is the ability to use knowledge and judgment to make good decisions. It can also refer to the accumulation of knowledge through learning.

3) Alan mentioned a few weeks ago that wisdom varies in its definition depending on the scripture in which it appears.

- a) That is absolutely true. In one place it may really indicate knowledge, in another it may have a tie to how we make decisions and other things.

4) In the context of James' letter, I still like the Hebrew mindset definition we spoke of before:

... wisdom is the concept of knowing how to conduct life in conformity with God's Law.

5) Ok let's hear what James has to say about wisdom...

James 3:13–18 (NASB 2020)

Wisdom from Above

¹³ Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. ¹⁵ This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. ¹⁶ For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peace-loving, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, free of hypocrisy. ¹⁸ And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

6) James begins here with a question that is to cause us to answer for ourselves not necessarily for gathering actual responses – who is wise and understanding?

- a) He then explains that that person (and us) will show that wisdom in the way we behave.
- b) He ties it back to the works/deeds we have discussed.

7) When he then speaks of bad behavior – jealousy, selfishness, arrogance.

James – Faith Demonstrated – 2025

- a) As we display these things, we are displaying a wisdom which is within our selfish selves and not in any way wisdom which is from God.
 - b) To the contrary, according to James here, those kinds of behaviors are demonic which I take to mean being of Satan.
- 8) Another point he makes here which I think we can definitely see playing out in our world today is that when jealousy and selfish ambition do exist chaos follows – he calls it “disorder and every evil thing.”
- 9) He concludes his thoughts by a fruit basket list of the good things that come from living with wisdom from God and not our own self-imposed “so called” wisdom.
- a) Pure, peace-loving, gentle, reasonable full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, free of hypocrisy.
 - b) This is all about how we deal with people – not just our Christian brothers and sisters but all people.
- 10) Now comes the final statement of this passage.

¹⁸And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

11) You may or may not recall, but we talked about the phrase fruit of righteousness in our study of Philippians. There, Paul says:

¹¹ having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which *comes* through Jesus Christ, for the glory and praise of God.

12) We talked about this and basically concluded that “fruit of righteousness” was in truth a combination of all the fruit of the Spirit listed in Gal 5:22.

Do we agree with that?

How is what James says here to affect our lives?

1) From good wisdom and how it affects our lives, James moves on once again to our selfish side.

James 4:1–4 (NASB 2020)

Things to Avoid

¹ What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is the source not your pleasures that wage war in your body’s parts? ² You lust and do not have, *so* you commit murder. And you are envious and cannot obtain, *so* you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask with the wrong motives, so that you may spend *what you request* on your pleasures. ⁴ You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

2) He opens with another rhetorical question; What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you?

3) He then supplies the answer – to boil it down to a single word again, self.

James – Faith Demonstrated – 2025

- a) Actually, the answer here is a little more detailed and he brings out a point that we many times do not really consider which is the root of self – the parts of our body.
- b) When we really consider it, we see that it is the parts of our being that are really what is driving self.
- c) If we were only heads and had no hands to hold things, no parts of our bodies that gave pleasure, no need for things because we could not use them, we would be much more easily satisfied.
- d) In one translation the answer reads:

“Do they not come from here, from the desires at war in your organs?”¹¹”
- e) Of course, one of the biggest troublemakers is what we call the heart – not the organ but the emotion.
- f) In this case, what that means is our mind being a slave to the rest of the parts of your body including our emotions – wanting to feel good – so it provides the desire behind all that.
 - i) The eyes see things and because they are desirable to the heart (mind or other parts) we want them.
 - ii) Then we have to control that desire and properly evaluate whether what we see and want is proper for us to have and at what cost.
- 4) In all this, James provides some pretty strong results, murder, fights, and quarrels.
- 5) Then he really calls out a problem – asking God to give us income so we can spend it to acquire all these things we desire. “PROSPERITY GOSPEL”?
- 6) He finally calls those who are this way adulteresses.
- 7) This whole passage is a super strong indictment of living as Christians but, as James puts it, “having a friendship with the world.”

What’s your reaction to all that? – O.k.? Strong? Totally over the top?

- 8) We all sit here and say to ourselves “that’s not me – I’m not like that” and I would absolutely agree.
 - a) To the degree that James describes these folks, we are not them.

However, do you think we could raise our hands just a little bit and maybe some small areas?

- 9) This is one of those places where James is doing what I call “starting to meddle” or perhaps “hitting where it hurts”.
- 10) Of course, the real gut punch here is that those who fall into this category are “enemies of God”.
- 11) I can’t think that any of us would ever want to be there!

¹¹ A. K. M. Adam, *James: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, ed. Martin M. Culy, Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), 75.