

THE MOST UNRULY MEMBER IN THE CHURCH

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By the Book™ A Chapter by Chapter
Bible Study Series from Jerry Vines
Ministries

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Let's Begin

King Solomon said, "Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out: so where there is no talebearer, the strife ceaseth (Prov. 26:20). An accurate paraphrase might be, "without wood, a fire won't burn, and without a gossip, there is no controversy." The wise king was simply revealing the power of ungodly words.

Nowhere in Scripture is there a more concentrated effort to reveal the harm unholy speech wreaks on the body of Christ than James three. The entire chapter focuses on speech—both good and bad—and the effect each has not only in our personal lives, but also in the lives of others. James teaches truth about the good and bad effects of speech by using beautiful, expressive word pictures. Look for these vivid pictures as we study this chapter.

As we journey through chapter three, we will follow the simple outline below:

I. The Problem of Ungodly Words (vv. 1-12)

II. The Prescription of Godly Wisdom (vv. 13-18)

I. The Problem of Ungodly Words (vv. 1-12)

The title of this lesson says it all: the most unruly member in our church is the tongue. And, as we indicated earlier, James has more to say about the tongue than perhaps any other place in Scripture. He knew the power of the tongue. So did the wisest king in all the earth, King Solomon. Again, Solomon writes, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue" (Prov. 18:21). Words possess incredible influence.

James begins this section briefly addressing those who intentionally and purposefully employ words publicly—teachers. He notes, "My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation" (v. 1). Teachers are the surgeons of mind and heart. One slip and a single word can slice and maim. Suppose a person taught that sinners were saved by works not grace. Some people teach this. Unfortunately, the doctrine so skews the Gospel, a person believing and trusting the thrust of the teaching is deceived into falsely thinking he or she is saved. False doctrine can send a person to hell! No wonder James offers his brief exhortation in the form of a warning—"knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation." It is one thing to hold wrong doctrine; it is quite another to teach and influence others to hold wrong doctrine. Those who do are judged very strictly.

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In short, James teaches the tongue—the words we speak—is an accurate indicator of our spiritual health. When we are feeling bad, we often look in the mirror and examine our tongue to see if it is "coated." A "coated" tongue indicates fungal infection. Hence, the words we speak may often reveal an infection in our spiritual lives.

First, James explains the directive nature of the tongue. He writes, "Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body. Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth" (vv. 3-4). In his explanation, he uses two everyday images to make his point clear. The tongue is similar to a *bit* in a horse's mouth. While the bit weighs but a few ounces, the horse weighs in at half a ton. Yet the bit controls and directs the horse with a fair amount of precision. In fact even a small boy or girl can control the huge animal because of the bit. Similarly, it only takes a single word to direct a life. For example, a judge can say, "Guilty!"



and a man's life changes for the next 20 years. A woman says "yes" to the proposal of a man, and both their futures are changed.

Therefore, words carry a tremendous amount of power and influence. For this reason alone, James insists we must learn to bridle the tongue, to direct our tongue to "obey us." Someone well said it takes two years for a baby to talk but 40 years to learn to hush! One small word can began a life of deceit and rebellion.

Another image James uses is a ship's *rudder*. Though the ship is massive, it only takes a very small rudder to turn the giant vehicle. In fact, whichever direction the helmsman desires, the ship will head in that direction. A small rudder can quickly crash a ship on the beach or guide it safely from harm's way. Words were the arsenal of Adolph Hitler. It is said he could spellbind masses of people with his bombastic speeches. He traded in words, and led millions of people to their doom. Anyone who has ever attended a Billy Graham crusade understands the power of godly words. When he spoke, thousands of people were influenced. Since the tongue can so measurably direct one's life—for good or for evil—James insists the tongue should be kept under control.

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Second, James explains the destructive nature of the tongue. He continues, "Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell. For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind: But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison" (vv. 5-8). James is a master of using everyday pictures which any person listening or reading his words could understand. Drawing on two more common elements, he clarifies the tongue's destructive nature.

Our tongue can burn like a *raging fire*. Though a fire is kindled by the smallest spark, it nonetheless quickly rages out of control through the entire forest. Many forest fires are started by a thrown cigarette stub—very small but the result is inestimable. Once again Solomon noted a foolish man has "in his lips a burning fire" (Prov. 16:27).

Surely fire is a good servant. How could we survive without the resources generated from fire? However, fire is a bad master; it must be controlled. Fire cooks our meals and warms our bodies. It also kills, maims, and destroys. A few words wrongly used can set ablaze a controversy which knows no end of hurt it causes. Indeed, James insists it becomes a "world of iniquity"; that is, there are all kinds of destructive fires including gossip, backbiting, and deceit. Like an axle, the tongue sets the whole wheel of life in motion—toward bitter or better. James emphatically says it is "set on fire of hell." Where do we think the wicked tongue gains its enormous heat? From hell itself! Like it or not, our tongue can be a channel for the flames of hell to indelibly burn not only into our lives but also into the lives of others.



Reflection Connection

Do your words about others bear these three marks: truth, necessity, and kindness? Take a few moments to meditate on your answer

In addition to burning like a *raging fire*, our tongue also is like a *wild animal*. God gave dominion to humankind to be over every other life form on this planet. In James' words, "every kind of animal is naturally subject to man." Therefore, we have learned to tame the wild creatures and sustain dominion over them. Contrarily, "no man can tame the tongue," James insists. We tame the tiger but not our tongue; we dominate the wolf but not our words. People tear down and hurt others with the smallest member in the church! Indeed the tongue is "an unruly evil" which, according to James, is "full of deadly poison." Like an adder, it quietly slips upon its victim and injects its deadly poison. After it has had its fill, it slithers quietly away. Words we speak should bear three marks: truth, necessity, and kindness.

Third, James explains the deceptive nature of the tongue. Note again his words, "Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be. Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh" (vv. 9-12). More images are at James' disposal. Words are like a fountain giving water. On the one hand, the fountain is cool and refreshing to the weary traveller (cp. Prov. 10:11). It bares sweet water to its seekers. Yet, our sinfulness provokes in us many inconsistencies. The fountain also offers bitter waters to those who drink. On the one hand we bless God with our tongues, but in the next breath, we curse men. James warns, this "ought not so to be"! A tree is known by its fruit (cp. Matt. 12:33).

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II. The Prescription of Godly Wisdom (vv. 13-18)

Though the problem of ungodly words exists, James assures his readers there remains a sure-fire remedy. We may be sickly due to an infection of unhealthy speech; nevertheless, God offers the perfect prescription as a cure. Note James' words, "Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom. But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work" (vv. 13-16). James possesses the literary gift of wrapping the faith in down-to-earth clothing, a gift which can never be overly used. Spiritual realities are best



expressed in practical ways. This very passage stands as a stellar example of this principle. In essence, James says, “Do you want to know what a wise man is? I’ll not only tell you, I’ll show you!”

No better method of Christian teaching exists than demonstrating the word of God through one’s life. James called for doing God’s Word not merely speaking God’s Word (cp. 1:22-25; 4:11). A truly wise man is not one with degrees hanging on a study wall but one whose life and character is filled with humility and good works. Furthermore, James offers, as a way to present his prescription of godly wisdom, a contrast between two very different lifestyles. On the one hand, there is wisdom from above; on the other, there is wisdom from below. While one is earthly, the other remains heavenly. One is devilish and the other Divine.

First, note the wisdom from hell (vv. 14-16). James offers three characteristics which mark this earthly wisdom. One mark of hellish wisdom is its *questionable stimuli* (v. 14). In other words, what makes the wisdom active? What motivates its expression? According to James, this type of wisdom gets its fuel from “bitterness,” “envying,” and “strife,” which can only end in “confusion” and against “every good work.” The second mark of wisdom from hell is its *inadequate source* (v. 15). Not only is its motivation wrong, its origin is evil. James mentions the perfect description of sinful human nature. He uses the term “earthly” which points to one’s outlook. The “earthly” people worm their way into the church desiring to operate the body of Christ like the business world. However, believers are always to “set your affections on things above” (Col. 3:2). No church can be run like Wall Street.

In addition, James employs another term to describe the inadequate sources of hellish wisdom—“sensual.” In essence, James is referring to the unspiritual (cp. 1 Cor. 2:14; Jude 19). Absent is the necessary hunger for spiritual things. Finally, James speaks about the “devilish.” The bottom line is, this wisdom is not from God but from Satan himself. The world, the flesh, and the devil characterize hellish wisdom (cp. 1 John 2:16; 4:3).

The third characteristic which marks wisdom from hell involves its *undeniable signs* (v. 16). In other words, all its manifestations are both alarming and wrong. James insists this type of wisdom only results in “confusion” not clarity. An atmosphere of instability covers perception and outlook. Discord among brother and sisters reigns (cp. 1 Cor. 14:33; Prov. 6:19). The same signs manifest themselves in the church which is fueled by hellish wisdom.

Second, by contrast, James proffers wisdom from heaven. He writes, “But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And

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Reflection Connection

What type of wisdom characterizes your life? Your church? Explain.]



the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace" (vv. 17-18). God's wisdom is, first and foremost, "pure"; that is, it is *clean in its desires*. All ulterior motives are scrubbed. Godly wisdom encourages Christians to "keep thyself pure" (1 Tim. 5:22). In addition to being *pure*, wisdom which is clean in desire is also *peaceable*. Godly wisdom promotes a sincere love for peace.

Moreover, not only is heavenly wisdom *clean in desire*, it is also *considerate in disposition*. In other words, it is "gentle," not insisting on its own rights. It is willing to ask forgiveness even when asking forgiveness is not required. Heavenly wisdom is furthermore *compassionate in its dealings*. Heavenly wisdom is "full of mercy and good fruits." The believer equipped with heavenly wisdom is kind in his or her actions while not sacrificing integrity for truth.

Finally, heavenly wisdom is *consistent in its deliberations*. It lacks "partiality" and lives prejudice free. It shows no special treatment to some while ignoring the needs of others because they have nothing in return to offer. In other words, it thrives "without hypocrisy."

Golden Greek Nugget

James begins the chapter with a cautious appeal to those desiring to be teachers of the word, "My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation" (v. 1). The Greek term translated "masters" is *didaskalos*, which comes from *didasko*, meaning "to teach." It is translated "doctors" when referencing the Jewish scholars (Luke 2:46). The Apostle Paul often referred to himself as a teacher of God's Gospel (Acts 13:1; 1 Cor. 12:28, 29; Eph. 4:11).

Wrap Up

In this study, James has been quite clear that the Christian's speech should reflect heavenly wisdom rather than worldly wisdom. The church is confused and filled with strife because far too often believers settle for less than God's clear will. Our only hope to offset wisdom from hell and control the tongue is complete surrender to the Lord Jesus Christ.