

James 3 • Speech & Righteousness

Introduction

Yes, there are many sermons' worth of material on controlling one's speech and self-control in general. But taken as a whole this is really a lesson on righteousness, about how to live according to the Spirit rather than the flesh. How does one become righteous? Does it happen all at once or are there steps? According to James, righteousness begins, on a practical life-application level, with the tongue.

¹Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we 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 bridle the whole body as well. ³Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. ⁴Look at 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. ^{5a}So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things.

^{5b}See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! ⁶And 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.

[Read 3:1-5a]

Q: What is the common denominator between the bit in the horse's mouth and the rudder on a ship?

A: They both dictate the direction of the horse or ship. They determine the overall course.

Q: Doesn't our "heart" determine our direction? Isn't what one "intends" or "feels" the true indicator of their life's course rather than mere words?

A: The mind may "know better" and one may possess the knowledge of how one **SHOULD** act and how one **SHOULD** walk, but speech betrays the true measure of the heart, intentions and feelings. Speech, contrary to the better judgment of personal knowledge, conveys the true condition of the heart.

Q: The bit placed in a horse's mouth is not a natural part of the horse. What might be the applications of this for us?

A: The bit is a device placed by its master into the horse's mouth which, combined with training, teaches the animal how to correctly respond to the rider's commands in order to go in the right direction. It's God's Word and Spirit implanted within us to which we must be consistently obedient in order to learn control.

[Read 3:5b-6]

Q: The Greek word "adikia" rendered here as "iniquity" can also be translated as "unrighteousness". What is another way of translating v.6?

A: "...the tongue is a fire, the very world of unrighteousness..." (modified)

Q: Why is the symbolism of unrighteous speech as a small fire appropriate?

A: It is a force of destruction, quickly spreading, and generally traceable to a single starting point.

Q: In v.1-5 the symbol of the bit and rudder represents the control of direction or course. In v.6 one of the things set on fire by the tongue is "the course of our life." What is meant in the revelation in v.6 that the source of this unrighteousness is hell? What does that mean to us?

A: The war waged by Satan against God is taking place on the battleground of our heart. Being born with sin resident in our flesh, the flames of hell make every effort to consume us individually along with everyone else with whom we come into contact.

Q: Read Romans 7:21-23. Combined with James' teaching in this passage, how might we synthesize these teachings into a practical application for our life?

A: Our tongue is a spiritual barometer of the spiritual battle within us, indicating which side is winning.

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⁷For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. ⁸But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.

[Read 3:7-8]

Q: Who is the “no one” in this passage that cannot tame the tongue?

A: It’s really “no human being”.

Q: What might be an appropriate way of re-stating this verse taking humans out of the equation?

A: Only God can tame the tongue.

[Read 3:9-12]

Q: What is James’ main point? What is he trying to get us to recognize through these examples?

A: There’s no gray area. Draw a line and on one side write “righteousness” and on the other “unrighteousness”. There is no transitional state or condition between them. They cannot co-exist with each other, even if the line is drawn so that 75% of the page is “righteousness” and 25% of the page is “unrighteousness”. The flames of hell that begin as a spark in the tongue will eventually consume everything.

⁹With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; ¹⁰from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. ¹¹Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? ¹²Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.

[Read 3:13]

Q: What is the contrast in v.13 to the discussion leading up to it through v.12?

A: Whereas the discussion was the tongue as the flame of unrighteousness, James’ antidote is good behavior.

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

Q: What is the difference between the tongue and deeds?

A: The tongue is all talk, subject to the whims and condition of the heart. Deeds – or good behavior – is **WALKING** in obedience and providing repetitive training in doing the right thing over and over.

¹⁴But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. ¹⁵This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. ¹⁶For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing.

Q: What might eventually happen if we do the right thing over and over, if our behavior is consistent with our obedience?

A: Our heart changes so that the tongue conveys righteousness.

[Read 3:14-16]

Q: What are the two tools of spiritual warfare most employed by Satan?

A: Jealousy and self-ambition.

Q: Why do you suppose these are Satan’s most common tools?

A: They’re the very things he most suffers from himself. His jealousy of God and ambition to become like Him is at the root of Satan’s personal rebellion and sin. This is the source of the flames of hell, largely comprised of jealousy and self-ambition.

Q: According to v.14, what does jealousy and self-ambition cause one to do?

A: “...lie against the truth.” The evidence of their presence is betrayed through the tongue.

Q: What word might describe the condition of harboring jealousy and self-ambition while lying about it to cover it up?

A: Hypocrisy.

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

[Read 3:17]

Q: The antidote for hypocrisy! Here are the characteristics or mechanisms by which spiritual warfare is waged by God. What is a practical application for each of these traits in our life and how do they address the issues of the tongue, jealousy, self-ambition and hypocrisy? [Group discussion might go way beyond these but the following is provided to provoke discussion.]

- **Pure:** Alludes to the previous observation “Nor can salt water produce fresh” in v.12. Purity is not bestowed but obtained by driving out impurity and embracing purity. This is the essence of sanctification, of the symbolism of baptism that in our **BEHAVIOR** we reject all spiritual impurity through total obedience to His Word.
- **Peaceable:** The goal of Satan’s hell-spawned tongue of fire is war and strife and division. (The image of fire inflaming, consuming and spreading.) The goal of our behavior to produce deeds for Christ is reconciliation, unity and peace.
- **Gentle:** Satan at times may be subtle but never gentle. Gentleness implies willingness to engage in a dialog rather than incite and inflame.
- **Reasonable:** Ever notice how Jesus never asked someone to do something unreasonable? Never asked them to do the impossible or seek the unattainable?
- **Full of Mercy and Good Fruits:** In every example of righteousness throughout both Testaments, one of the proofs of our righteousness is to “love our neighbor as our self.” It’s tied back to chapter 2 that the quality of our faith is in direct proportion to our deeds, our treatment of others.
- **Unwavering:** Invokes images of James 1:6, “...driven and tossed by the wind...”, James 1:17, “every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.” And 3:2, “...If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man....” David would characterize this as keeping one’s feet on the path, never turning to the right or left.
- **Without Hypocrisy:** Cured of the enigmas of v.8-12. We’re a fountain of fresh water, a fig tree, consistent and pure and producing fruit.

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

[Read 3:18]

Q: What is the significance of a seed?

A: Having made the choice to select it and plant it, the seed must be watered and cultivated in order to grow up to produce fruit, and having produced fruit which contains seeds within, continues to grow to overcome the entire field.

*In Luke 8:15, in the course of explaining the Parable of the Sower, Jesus explained the working of the seed that fell onto the good soil: “But the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have **heard the word** in an **honest and good heart**, and **hold it fast**, and **bear fruit** with perseverance.” Take note that every action has to do with obedience and behavior, and that the subject of the tongue is completely missing. You have to cure the disease to get rid of the symptoms.*