

A WORLD OF EVIL

James 3:1-12

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Scripture Passage

Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, set the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

James 3:1-12 NIV

A WORLD OF EVIL

“There is not a sexual relationship, an improper sexual relationship, or any other kind of improper relationship.”¹ These words, spoken by President William Jefferson Clinton, have plagued our country for over a year now. The meaning of these words has been confirmed, repeated, and eventually denied by the President and his supporters many times since January 21, 1998. These words were spoken out of a spirit of deception and a carnal concern only for oneself without regard to how they would affect anyone else. These words are but a highly publicized utterance of the tongue; they are only an example of the types of evil that flow out of the mouth by mankind on a daily basis.

Though we may be ashamed of the way that our President has conducted himself, we cannot deny that we have committed similar sins. The tongue has proven to be one of the hardest members of the human body to control. How often have you and I told deceptions, uttered profanities, spread gossip, and pronounced curses upon fellow humans? I know that in my case, the number is unfathomable. The third chapter of The Epistle of James deals with the issue of the tongue and how it is impossible for mankind, without the intervention of God, to control it.

The General Epistle of James was most likely written by James the Righteous, who is listed among Christ’s biological siblings (Matt. 12:47, 13:55). This James, although not one of the original 12 apostles, was very important in the early Church. He was converted in a private meeting with his resurrected brother (1 Cor. 15:7) and then proceeded to take charge of the Church of Jerusalem. It is to him that Peter reports after being freed from prison (Acts 12:17), and Paul speaks of him as one of the leaders of the

Church on many occasions (Acts 12:18, 15:13, Gal. 2:9).ⁱⁱ The other two possibilities are James the son of Zebedee and James the son of Alphaeus. The first of these two was martyred long before it could have been written (Acts 12:2). The son of Alphaeus has almost no mention of his name outside of the Gospels and it is therefore assumed that he did not hold the authority in the early Church to write such an epistle.ⁱⁱⁱ With these two possibilities eliminated, we can assume that the traditionally accepted James was the true author.

James the Righteous was martyred in AD 62, so he probably wrote his epistle shortly before then. It is addressed to “the twelve tribes scattered among the nations” (James 1:1). “The twelve tribes” is a reference to all the people of Israel, who at that time were represented by the two remaining tribes of Judah and Benjamin. “Scattered among the nations” is in most versions “of the dispersion.” The dispersion was a common way to speak of the whole Jewish body, the majority of which in the first century did not live in Palestine but throughout the Roman Empire.^{iv} James himself held very strong Jewish traditions (Acts 15), and it makes sense that he would address his letter primarily to Jews. This Epistle does, however, contain very important moral lessons for all Christians, and it is appropriate for those of us who are not Jews to apply its teachings to our lives.^v

The great Christian reformer Martin Luther was very critical of James and he said that it “contains nothing evangelical.”^{vi} He went on to say, “I therefore refuse him a place among the writers of the true canon of my Bible.”^{vii} What Luther failed to realize was that, as C. Leslie Mitton said, “it was written for those who had no doubt that they were Christians, but needed to have their understanding of the word ‘Christian’ greatly deepened and widened.”^{viii} James’ writings are a moral lesson, intended to teach

Christians how to live Holy lives. His main goal is to abolish lukewarm Christianity and replace it with true Christians who not only profess Christ and faith in him, but also live like spirit-filled Christians and show faith by their works. It is not so much a letter as “a sermon dealing with ethical admonition.”^{ix} James deals with issues such as showing favoritism, faith without works, taming the tongue, wisdom, submitting to God, wealth, and prayer.

I chose this topic because in our modern society, the tongue is one of the most misused body parts, and I see controlling of the tongue as “the final frontier” of total submission to God. The words we use and things we say are continually causing us to stumble. Whether we merely speak misinformation on a subject that we have no authority on or we blatantly use profanities and slanderous remarks, the tongue always gets us into trouble. Our recently acquitted President was being tried for having misled people by words that flowed from his mouth. It is easy to pass judgement on him for his sins, but when we look at ourselves, are we any less guilty for having misused the tongue? I hope to learn exactly what scripture says about the tongue, and how our tongues can be pleasing to God instead of an abomination.

Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly (v.1).

James begins his teachings on the tongue by warning people about the office of Rabbi. Teachers are prominent figures, viewed by many, and open to public criticism. A person in a teaching role is going to have every aspect of his life judged by others, whether or not the issue in question is private or public matters. Alexander Maclaren gives us a good example of the purpose of James’ statement regarding teachers.

No doubt, in the infant Church, with its flexible organization, there were often scenes very strange to our eyes, . . . where many voices of would-be teachers contended for a hearing. James would check that unwholesome eagerness by the thought that teachers who do not practice what they preach will receive a heavier judgment than those who did not set up to be instructors.^x

James is warning his readers that the privileges that come with being a teacher are accompanied by great disadvantages as well. Although teachers may have the privilege of presenting their ideas and beliefs before the congregation, they must be extremely careful about what they say and do. Their students who are more independent and self-thinking will no doubt be very critical of their instructor. If they either speak things that are false or don't live up to the standards they teach, they will be ridiculed and thrown out of their position. When teaching people who are very susceptible to other people's influence, the teacher runs the risk of giving them false information to live by. This can ultimately lead to the spiritual destruction of the students.

The Authorized Version of the Bible uses the word "masters" instead of "teachers." Although "teachers" is a more accurate translation, the word "masters" helps to show that anyone in authority is subject to this same rule. All public and authoritative figures are teachers, having their lives watched and being critiqued by the media and the public. As the example of President Clinton shows, there is no private life for those who are in the spotlight. It is thus equally important for anyone who is going to be in a high profile position, whether it is in entertainment, media, or politics, to consider the weight and responsibility that goes along with their position as it is for teachers.

In one sense, we are all called upon to be teachers at one time or another. Parents teach their children, older siblings' influence rubs off on younger siblings, an experienced employee shows a new employee how to do their job; the list goes on and on. In each of

these examples, the ability of the instructor is being judged by the instructed. When the teacher fails at the task, the student, whether he should or not, is likely to deem his superior as incompetent. We must all, therefore, be careful about whatever we do, so that we do not unknowingly misguide others.

We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check (v.2).

The first notable item in this verse is James' use of the word "we." He does not try to set himself up better than anyone else, but humbly accepts the fact that he, like everyone else, has been born with a carnal nature and thus can easily fall victim to sin. This humbleness on James' part is similar to that of Paul's in Romans, where he says, "For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing (Romans 7:19)." The early church leaders, having firsthand met and seen the perfection of Christ, seem to have a humility that needs to be brought into the modern church, where doctrines of Christian perfection exist. Paul and James both realized that compared to Christ, the great things that they taught and preformed still didn't come near to perfection, and only by submitting oneself entirely to God can one hope to do the smallest amount of good.

James then goes on to speak about the power of the tongue. He says that only a perfect man can hope to control their tongue, and if anyone has that ability, the rest of their body is easy to master. Maclaren sums up verse two this way: "He who can completely keep it under command is a 'perfect' man, because the difficulty of doing so is so great that the attainment of it is a test of perfection."^{xi}

The difficulty of controlling the tongue is obviously a great one, for James himself, as formerly discussed, doesn't even claim to have mastered this task. Louis Evans says, "Few of us can lay claim to perfection on the basis of such tongue control; rare is the man who never says the wrong thing."^{xii} If this is the case, there is no hope for anyone to be able to take control of their tongue. If a person persists in trying to do this on their own, they will most likely become aware of a greater number of times when they failed. That person will grow tired of trying to do the right thing and ultimately give up on Christianity altogether. This brings to mind Jesus' words, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God (Mark 10:24)."

When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal (v.3).

In the tradition of the prophets and his older brother Jesus, James now shows examples of everyday occurrences to help illustrate the point that he is making. His first example is that of the guiding mechanism of a horse. He compares the bit to the tongue and the horse to a man. The tongue can control the course of its owner, just as the bit controls its horse. Evans describes the controlling power of the tongue like this:

What a guiding, influential instrument the tongue can be! A single speech in a senate can fasten a statute on a nation; a single phrase in one senator's speech can force the bill through. Armies have won victories with a single thrilling battle cry.^{xiii}

There is one other analogy in this verse that is not quite as obvious. "We," which represents the person controlling the bit, is comparable to the force controlling the tongue. If we allow evil to rule in our lives, then it will direct our tongue to lead our

persons down the road of destruction. But if we give the reins to Christ, he will control our tongues and lead us up the straight and narrow path.

Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go (v.4).

This verse follows the same pattern as the preceding verse. The rudder is the tongue, the ship is the person, and the pilot is the guiding force. There is one other factor of this verse, however, that wasn't discussed earlier. This is the strong wind that drives the ship. When compared to our person, this represents the outside influences, those things that push us one way or the other. For the person who is a slave of sin, the winds are those negative influences that along with the tongue's guidance help drive the person down the destructive road. For those controlled by Christ, the winds represent the pure things and influences in life that help push us along in our Christian walk.

Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark (v.5).

This verse completes the analogies of the two previous verses. Its statement that the tongue is a small part of the body compares it with the smallness of the bit and rudder. Instead of saying that the tongue has great power or influence, James chooses the word "boasts." This is used as a symbol of the negativity of the tongue. No one likes boasting, even if the one boasting is doing so with just cause. Consider what Joseph's brothers did to him when he accurately boasted (Genesis 37). By saying that the tongue "makes great boasts," James is speaking of the evilness of the tongue, even if it does have great power and reason to boast.^{xiv}

Next James begins his most effective analogy. In the previous ones, he compares the tongue to a tool of guidance. Now, he compares it to a spark, the tool used to create a ravaging fire. Just one spark can create a fire of great destruction. Evans describes it like this: “It is so easy to start a fire. Throw a cigarette into a dry bush, and a forest flames to total destruction.”^{xv} A spark has the potential of burning up a whole forest, destroying all of the life contained within and turning it into something dead and without value.

The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell (v.6).

In this verse, James completes the idea that he began in the last verse and comes to the point that he has been building up to thus far. He compares the tongue to the spark and fire discussed above, saying that if it is allowed to run unchecked, it will destroy and corrupt its owner. The human tongue speaks pure evil. It is by hell itself, by the powers of darkness, which the tongue utters. The tongue brings more evil and greater destruction than any other part of the body.

Maclaren gives us more examples of this point.

Foul speech, heard in schools or places of business, read in filthy books, heard in theatres, has polluted many a young life, and kindled fires which have destroyed a man, body and soul. Speech is like the axle which, when it gets heated, sets the wheel on fire. And what comes of the train then?^{xvi}

Take also the example set by President Clinton. Had he not told misleading information but been honest about his relationship with Miss Lewinsky, our country would not have had to go through over a year of lies and trials. Had he told the truth, he would receive more respect from congress and would be able to gain their support on world issues, such as in our recent campaign in Iraq. Had he done what he should have done, the world

would not look upon our form of government as ineffective as it does now, for our elected officials would be able to act as they should, without bringing up past faults and rumors of each other.

The example of the evil that the tongue can spread is described best and most explicitly by Evans.

And what an inflammable instrument the tongue can be! One careless word tossed out of your mouth—and there is fire. One lie, one sentence of gossip with the lift of an eyebrow, one hellish insinuation, one evil story—and the conflagration begins. Human hearts can be like tinder, dry of the milk of human kindness and parched from lack of the rains of mercy; in such tinder the holocaust comes quickly, leaping through hearts and homes, across towns, into newspaper columns and conversations, fanned by the winds of hatred and man's merciless depravity, until the smell of burned flesh, destroyed homes and scarred souls is everywhere—all because one tongue wagged out of control.^{xvii}

All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man (v.7).

Once again, James uses examples taken from every day life to help illustrate his point. Here he is showing the achievements of man, the many things we can control and have done. God has given us control of all animals (Genesis 1:28), and this is one gift that we have used fairly wisely. Mankind has successfully tamed and dominated all kinds of animals, whether they are of the earth, air, or sea.

But no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison (v.8).

Although man has done all of the great things spoken of in the previous verse, he still cannot tame the tongue. This is an impossibility for him. James' choice of words here gives an evil character to the tongue. It makes the reader picture a deadly snake, the

symbol of evil, coiled and ready to strike. As Maclaren puts it, “The venom spurted out by a calumnious tongue is more deadly than any snake poison. Blasphemous words, or obscene words, shot into the blood by one swift dart of the fangs, may corrupt its whole current, and there is no Pasteur to expel the virus.”^{xviii} The poison that the tongue gives is more deadly than anything else a human can do.

The key to this whole section of James is found in this verse. Up to this point, James has been showing the impossibilities of man, and how easily our tongues can corrupt us. Here, James says, “No man can tame the tongue.” Jesus said previously, “With God all things are possible (Matt. 19:26).” When we give God full control of our lives, he can use every part of us, even the most evil tongue, for his glorification. When we allow the Holy Spirit to control our bits, to steer our rudders, he will guide us in the direction that we should go. C.S. Lewis gives us a good illustration of this point.

Nothing, not even the best and noblest, can go on as it now is. Nothing, not even what is lowest and most bestial, will not be raised again if it submits to death. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. Flesh and blood cannot come to the Mountains. Not because they are too rank, but because they are too weak.^{xix}

Without total submission to God, we can not hope to achieve anything that even resembles good. When we give every aspect of our lives, including our tongues, to Christ to use as he sees fit, the impossible is easily accomplished.

With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness (v.9).

Once again James makes use of the word “we.” The amount of humility that it must take for such a great apostle and teacher to include himself in a listing of sinners is unimaginable.

Not everything that we do with the tongue is evil. Millions of people gather in churches throughout the nation on Sunday morning to sing praises to God. But how can we truly praise God if we curse his creation? Of all that God created, man was the one thing that “was very good (Gen. 1:31).” When someone curses a fellow man, whom God made in his own image (Gen. 1:27), he is speaking blasphemy against God himself. John the Beloved, in his First Epistle, said, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen (1 John 4:20).”

When we speak both praises to God and curses to man, we represent ourselves falsely on one account or the other. If we truly mean our praises to God, we cannot wish curses upon man. If we wish curses upon man, we cannot truly love God. Jesus said, “By your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned (Matt. 12:37).” If we speak anything false, we will be condemned. The person who truly praises God cannot speak curses against man.

Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be (v.10).

This verse is completing the idea begun in the previous verse. Not only should this not be, as James puts it, this cannot be, as I have already shown. True praise of the creator cannot be accompanied by cursing what he has created. This is like saying to a composer, “You are an extremely talented musician, but I think your work is terrible.” Either we hold one opinion or the other, we cannot believe both.

Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring (v.11)?

As he comes to the conclusion of this section, James leaves us with two more thoughts on the tongue. The first of these is comparing the tongue to a spring, the source of water for a river or creek. Like a spring, the tongue spews out its contents, whether good or evil. The spring, however, cannot produce two types of water. Either it is fresh water, good for drinking, or it is salt water, which is of no use to man. Likewise, the tongue should only flow with one type of speech. Its unnatural ability to speak both praises and curses is evidence that something is wrong with it.

My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water (v.12).

Like the fig tree and grapevine, our tongues produce fruit; not in the literal sense, but like the “Fruit of the Spirit” that Paul describes in Galatians 5. One plant cannot produce different fruit. If a plant is a fig tree, it bears figs. If it is a grapevine, it produces grapes. Neither of these can bear anything else. If a fig tree were to bear olives, it would be a freak of nature, unholy and unnatural, behaving in a way contrary to what its creator intended. It is the same when our tongue is misused. We were created with speech so that we might give God praise. Any other use of our tongues is a violation of God’s will and must be ceased.

Erdman, in explaining James’ examples of the spring and plants, helps us to fully understand what James is saying.

These last figures contain not only a rebuke of the perverse and sinful abuse of speech; they also suggest the probable explanation of such an abuse. “The tree is known by its fruit,” and “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.” An evil tongue is a sign of an evil nature. Unkind, bitter, impure speech suggests the need of a new birth; it is an indication that the speaker, whatever his position of profession, is not

filled with the Spirit of God. His faith is dead, his religion is not true. The use of the tongue is a test of life. Unless controlled by the power of Christ, the gift of speech may prove a deadly peril to the soul.^{xx}

“Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man (Ecc. 12:13). This is why we are here, this is why we were created. Unless we are serving God with our whole being, we will not be truly happy or complete. Every part of our body must be turned over to him to control. When we misuse the members that God has given us, we are rebelling against him. This cannot bring any true joy or contentment to our lives. Our rebellion will only destroy us.

So it is with the tongue. When we turn our mouths completely over to God, he will take the reigns and steer our tongues in his servitude. No good can come from lying, gossiping, cursing, or any other verbal abuses. The President has not won, even though he was acquitted. His legacy is ruined, the office of the Presidency has been tarnished, and he cannot hope to pass any policy through a congress that will not support him. Allowing Satan to control our tongues can only lead us to destruction. Of all body parts, this small one can do the most harm and cause more destruction than anything else. We must turn our tongues over to God, and he will make them into something beautiful, destroying the body’s world of evil.

ENDNOTES

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- ⁱ William J. Clinton, “PBS’s ‘The News Hour with Jim Lehrer’ Transcript,” All Politics (www.cnn.com/allpolitics/index.html: CNN & Time, January 21, 1998).
- ⁱⁱ Alfred Plummer, The General Epistles of St. James and St. Jude (New York, NY: Holder and Stoughton), 35.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Bo Reicke, The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1964), 3.
- ^{iv} Frank E. Gaebelin, The Practical Epistle of James (Great Neck, NY: Doniger & Raughley, Inc., 1955), 32-33.
- ^v C. Leslie Mitton, The Epistle of James (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM.B. Eerdman’s Publishing Co., 1966) 16-17.
- ^{vi} Ibid., 7.
- ^{vii} John Dillenberger, Martin Luther (Chicago, Illinois: Quadrangle Books, Inc., 1961) 35-36.
- ^{viii} Mitton, 7.
- ^{ix} Everett Ferguson, Encyclopedia of Early Christianity (New York, NY: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1990), 482-483.
- ^x Alexander Maclaren, “Second Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, and James,” Expositions of Holy Scripture (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM. B. Eerdman’s Publishing Co., 1932), Vol. 14, 431-432.
- ^{xi} Ibid., 432.
- ^{xii} Louis Evans, Make Your Faith Work (Westwood, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1957), 67.
- ^{xiii} Ibid., 68.
- ^{xiv} Charles R. Erdman, The General Epistles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1941), 30.
- ^{xv} Evens, 68.
- ^{xvi} Maclaren, 434.
- ^{xvii} Evans, 69.

^{xviii} Maclaren, 435.

^{xix} C.S. Lewis, The Great Divorce (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1974), 102.

^{xx} Erdman, 31.

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