

## James 3

**James 3:1:** “My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.”

According to my Greek Lexicon, the word “masters” (Strong’s #1320) is the word “didaskalos”, and it means *teacher*. In this passage James is warning that being a teacher is a dangerous business. Teachers, he says, will receive the “greater condemnation”.

This is something that we need to take to heart. It is one thing to error in your own life; it is quite another to lead others into error. It is one thing to sin in your own life; it is quite another to lead other people into a life of sin. When you get up in front of other people and tell them what to do, you are taking responsibility for them. You had better be right about what you are doing, because if you are wrong then you will lead other people into error, sin, and judgment. As a teacher, your problems now affect the lives of others. Teaching is a dangerous business, and is not to be taken lightly.

Jesus Himself spoke of this:

**Matthew 5:19:** “Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

People often reject the idea that there are different ranks in the kingdom of Heaven, but that idea has a sound Biblical foundation. Jesus was plain that some of those who were first in this life would be last in the next, and vice versa (Matthew 19:30). There are some who will be called great, and there are some who will be the least. Those who taught men to sin will be called the least, while those who obeyed God and taught men to do the same would be called great.

The question is not “Do you *think* that you are sinning”, but rather, *are* you sinning? It does not matter if you personally believe that you are right; what really counts is that you *are* right. There is one right answer and there are a lot of wrong answers. If you teach men error then you will be held accountable for that.

There are many false teachers in the world today who teach heresy. For example, men like Rob Bell deny the existence of Hell and say that the Word of God is “old manna” and we need to move past the Bible to other things. By denying both the Bible and the reality of Hell, he is leading a great many people away from God. This is something that God takes *very* seriously.

Matters of theology and doctrine are not games; they are deadly serious business. I saw a story some time ago where a woman was concerned that the Tribulation was about to begin, so she tried to murder her children. She said that the reason she did that was to save their souls; she thought killing them was the only way to save them. In other words, her erroneous theology led her *to try to murder her own children*. Then there are the many people who are led astray by false teaches such as Harold Camping, who convinced people to sell everything they had because the world was going to end on May 21, 2011. As we know, the world did *not* end on the date he predicted, but his false teachings did destroy many lives.

Teaching is not something to be taken lightly. If you don't know what you are talking about then you shouldn't be teaching. If you are going to teach someone then you had better know the Word and you had better be solid. God will hold you accountable for what you have done.

Now, James does not tell us that we should avoid teaching altogether. Teaching is necessary, and it should not be neglected. However, he does urge us to speak with caution:

**James 3:2:** “For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.”

The word “offend” is Strong’s #4417 means “to cause to stumble or fall”. It is the same word that James used in the previous chapter:

**James 2:10:** “For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.”

The point James is making is that teachers often fail their students. They teach things that causes others to stumble or fall, and that leads to serious consequences – for both the student and the teacher. God holds people accountable when they do this. However, if we learn to master our tongue and watch our speech, then we can use our body for the good of others.

There is a need for teachers. God has given some people the gift of teaching, and He expects us to use that gift for the benefit of the body:

**Ephesians 4:11:** “And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;

12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:

13 Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ:”

Here Paul explains why God gave some people the gift of teaching. The reason we have teachers is for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, and for the edification of the body. By the use of teachers, God perfects the saints. By the use of teachers, God furthers the ministry. By the use of teachers, God edifies the body.

However, the gift of teaching is *not a permanent one*. Paul went on to explain in verse 13 that one day the gift of teaching will have filled its purpose. God created pastors and teachers and gave them a job to do. Once we all come in the unity of the faith and become perfect men (which actually *will* happen one day!), pastors and teachers will no longer be needed. Their job will be done and their task will be accomplished. (Incidentally, that is why we no longer have apostles or prophets; that job has already been finished, so those offices have been abolished. Now that the Church has been established we have no need for apostles, and now that we have the completed Bible we have no need for prophets.)

If teachers can learn to bridle their tongue and teach what is right, they can be tremendously effective. If they can master that ability then they can fulfill the purposes that Paul spoke of in Ephesians. Then they can edify the body and further the work of the ministry. James offers several analogies to explain what he means:

**James 3:3:** “Behold, we put bits in the horses’ mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body.

4 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.”

By the use of bits, people can make horses (animals much larger than people!) go wherever men want them to go. They can use the bits to direct the horse. Likewise, all it takes to turn a ship is a very small helm. The governor (or pilot) of the ship can direct the enormous vessel by making small changes to a small helm. A small device can have a tremendous impact on the bearing of a much larger object. As James goes on to point out, this can either be for the better or for the worse:

**James 3:5:** “Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!”

The tongue is a small body part – a very small one. Compared to the size of the body as a whole, it's really pretty insignificant. Yet the tongue is a powerful thing. Words carry a tremendous amount of weight, for good or for evil. Its importance far outstrips its size. Words can start a fight or end one. They can build cities or burn them down. They can end wars or start them. They can encourage people or destroy them. They can make your enemy your friend, or make your friend your enemy. It may be small, but it can cause great trouble and kindle great fires.

Words are exceedingly dangerous, and we should use them with care. When used well, words can cause great benefit and joy:

**Proverbs 25:11:** “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures [or settings] of silver.”

A word fitly spoken can heal broken relationships or change the tide of history. However, words can also cause tremendous destruction:

**Proverbs 26:18:** “As a mad man who casteth firebrands, arrows, and death,  
19 So is the man that deceiveth his neighbour, and saith, Am not I in sport?”

A few lying words are likened to death itself! Lies, after all, are made up of words – destructive, terrible words that lead to the death of relationships, the death of men, and the death of civilizations. Words are very dangerous and should be used with great care:

**James 3:6:** “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.”

What does our tongue do? It is a world of iniquity that defiles the whole body. It can set on fire nature itself with a fire that comes straight from hell. The words of evil men are likened to fire:

**Proverbs 16:27:** “An ungodly man diggeth up evil: and in his lips there is as a burning fire.”

It is so easy to gossip. It is so easy to spread evil. Spreading evil is like lighting a fire: before you know it there is a huge blaze that is impossible to control. Lives are destroyed and reputations are

ruined. It is such an easy thing to dig up evil, and it is so easy to spread it. Once you light it, though, there is no going back. Once a fire has started it can easily spread out of control.

Jesus warned that our words have the power to defile us:

**Mark 7:15:** "There is nothing from without a man, that entering into him can defile him: but the things which come out of him, those are they that defile the man."

We need to stop and think about the words that we say. It is so easy to be hateful and deceptive and to tear others down. Gossip is easy. Spreading lies is easy. Speaking evil of others is easy. Things like this have destroyed many churches and split many congregations. Our words have great power and we should use them with care.

James warned us that we need to take this subject seriously. The tongue is far more dangerous than we realize:

**James 3:7:** "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:  
8 But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison."

James points out that it is possible to tame all manner of animals. You can work with an animal and tame it until the animal is safe. Animals can get to a point where you no longer have to worry that they are going to try to kill you. It is tame; it is not dangerous any more. We say that it has become domesticated. The animal has been civilized and can now join the household as a member.

But tongues are a very different matter. The word "tame" (Strong's #1150) that James uses is the same word that is used in this passage:

**Mark 5:2:** "And when he was come out of the ship, immediately there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit,  
3 Who had his dwelling among the tombs; and no man could bind him, no, not with chains:  
4 Because that he had been often bound with fetters and chains, and the chains had been plucked asunder by him, and the fetters broken in pieces: neither could any man tame him.  
5 And always, night and day, he was in the mountains, and in the tombs, crying, and cutting himself with stones."

That's quite a picture, isn't it? Here we see a demon-possessed man who was truly out of control. People could not even bind him with chains! They tried to tame him but they utterly failed. Nothing that they did made any difference.

We know how this story ends: Jesus came along and cast out the demons and made the man whole. He did what man could not do; He tamed that which man could not tame. What was impossible with men was possible with God.

Remember, though, the warning of James. The tongue is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. You can tame your cat and your dog and get to the point where you can trust them, but your tongue can *never* be trusted. You cannot give your tongue free reign and let it do whatever it pleases. You must always be watching it and always be on your guard. You cannot set it free because it is deadly. You must use the power of God to control it and keep it under subjection. You must watch with great care.

This is a battle that you will always have to fight until the Lord calls you home. You must never let up. James goes on to point out the deceitful nature of our tongue:

**James 3:9:** "Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God.

10 Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be.

11 Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?

12 Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh."

It is so easy for us to come to church and praise God, and then go home and curse our neighbor! We speak highly of God and then we speak evil of men who are made in God's image. This is just an example of how dangerous our tongues really are.

Now, this does not mean that we must never criticize other people. It does not mean that we must turn a blind eye to sin. Some people think that "if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." That, however, is not Biblical. Jesus did not hesitate to condemn people who needed to hear it:

**Matthew 23:27:** "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness.

28 Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.

29 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous,

30 And say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.

31 Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets.

32 Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers.

33 Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?"

Jesus is not the only one who confronted men for their sin. The apostles did it as well. They even named names:

**1 Timothy 1:19:** "Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck:

20 Of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme."

**2 Timothy 4:14:** "Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil: the Lord reward him according to his works:"

**Galatians 2:11:** "But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed."

**2 Timothy 4:10:** “For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia, Titus unto Dalmatia.”

**III John 1:9:** “I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not.

10 Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church.”

People often say “Jesus said we shouldn't judge each other”, but that is actually not what He said at all. As you can see, the apostles did not hesitate to judge people, and they even called them out by name. What Jesus actually said was that we should not condemn people for doing things that we are doing ourselves:

**Matthew 7:1:** “Judge not, that ye be not judged.

2 For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.

3 And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?

4 Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye?

5 Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye.”

Do you see what Jesus said in verse 5? He did not say “Whatever you do, don't ever judge anyone for anything, ever.” Instead He said that we should stop sinning ourselves *so that we can see clearly to help those around us*. What Jesus was condemning here is *hypocrisy*.

Someone else who made it clear that we should confront others for their sin is *James himself*:

**James 5:19:** “Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him;

20 Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins.”

Notice that James does *not* say “If you see someone caught up in sin, don't judge them. Just go on about your business.” Instead he says that we should *tell him* and help him overcome his sin. We should seek to help them overcome “the error of his way” so that we can save him. We should actually *get involved*, not walk away and do nothing.

Sometimes getting involved means saying things that aren't very nice. Calling the Pharisees a “generation of vipers” wasn't very nice, but they needed to hear it. They needed someone to point out their utter hypocrisy and self-righteousness, because otherwise they had no hope of being saved. They needed to be told that they were morally bankrupt so that they would seek repentance, forgiveness, and grace. It was a hard message, but it was one that they needed to hear.

As you can see, we need to act with wisdom, with love, and with grace:

**James 3:13:** “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.”

Those who are wise should prove it by the way they live their lives. They should act wisely and speak wisely. They should live with meekness, gentleness, and love. Their words should be fitly spoken, not firebrands. They should speak the right words at the right time. They should seek to edify, not destroy. We should use our words for good, not for evil.

If you are truly wise then you should *demonstrate* your wisdom by the way you live your life. If you are spending your life telling other people how great you are then you have lost your way. If you use your words to try to impress other people about your own greatness then you are mistaken. Meekness does not boast about itself. Love does not seek its own. Our works – works of love, works of service, works of grace and kindness – should speak for themselves. If we have to convince others that we are wise by telling them that then we aren't really wise at all. Our lives and our actions should do the talking.

We should use our words for the edification of the body and for the glorification of God. Let him who boasts boast in the Lord. Words of envy and self-glorification do not come from God:

**James 3:14:** “But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth.

15 This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish.

16 For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work.”

Words that are from above are words that seek to do the Lord's will. They seek to edify others, to guide them to God, to glorify the Father, to worship our Savior, to follow the Spirit, to do what is right and holy. They are words that are about the Father's business. Words that are full of envy and strife and self-glorification are words that are from Hell. They are of the devil and they are not becoming of a Christian. Envy and strife are hallmarks of the devil's work. The words that come from God are of a very different nature:

**James 3:17:** “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.

18 And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.”

Notice how differently godly wisdom is! Notice the character quality of godly words! Heavenly wisdom – and Heavenly words – are pure. There is nothing evil or dark about them, and there is nothing that makes a lie. They are holy words. They are honest. They ring true.

The heavenly words are peaceable – they seek to stop a fight instead of start one. They calm anger instead of stirring it up. They seek peace – God's peace. They are not words of strife or bitterness, but are words of healing. Heavenly wisdom is characterized by gentleness, not harshness. It is merciful. It is without partiality or hypocrisy. There is no favoritism, but instead true justice and honesty. It is sown in peace, not in war – in goodness, not in evil.

This is the sort of wisdom that we should chase, and these are the sort of words that we should speak.