

## 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 means *teacher*. In this passage James is warning us that being a teacher is a serious responsibility! Teachers will receive the “greater condemnation”.

This is something we need to take to heart. It's one thing to error in your own life. However, it's much more serious to lead other people into error! Sinning in your own life is bad; leading other people into sin is worse. When you teach other people what to do you're taking a certain amount of responsibility for them. You had better be right about what you're doing because if you're wrong and lead people into heresy or sin then God will hold you responsible for it. Teaching people is a serious business and must not 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.”

Some people reject the idea that there are different ranks in the kingdom of Heaven, but that doctrine has a sound Biblical foundation. Jesus taught that some people who were first in this life will be last in the next, and vice versa (Matthew 19:30). There are some who will be called great and others who will be the least. Those who taught people to sin will be called the least,

while those who obeyed God and taught others to do the same will be called great.

The question is not whether you *think* you're sinning, but rather, *are* you sinning? It doesn't matter if you believe that you're right; what really counts is that you *are* right. There's one right answer and a lot of wrong answers. If you teach people heresy or sin then God will hold you accountable for it.

There are many false teachers in the world today. For example, some people deny the existence of Hell. Others claim that the Word of God is “old manna” and we need to move past it to other things. Those who deny either the Bible or the reality of Hell are leading people away from God. That's something the Lord takes *very* seriously.

Matters of theology and doctrines aren't games! They are an extremely serious business. I saw a story some time ago where a woman believed that the Tribulation was about to begin, so she tried to murder her children. She said the reason she did it was to save their souls, because she believed that killing them was the only way to save them. This means her erroneous theology led her *to try to murder her own children*. There are also many people who are led astray by false teaches such as Harold Camping, who convinced people to sell everything they had based on his teaching that world was going to end on May 21, 2011. The world did *not* end on the date he predicted, but his false teachings did destroy many lives.

Teaching must not be taken lightly. If you don't know what you're talking about then you shouldn't be teaching. If you're going to teach someone then you had better know the Word!

James doesn't tell us to avoid teaching altogether. Teaching other people the great doctrines of God is extremely necessary and must not be neglected! However, he does urge us to be careful:

**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 Strongs #4417 and means “to cause to stumble or fall”. It's 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 tremendous need for teachers. God has given some people the gift of teaching, and He requires them to use that gift for the benefit of the church:

**Ephesians 4:11-13:** “And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: 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:”

In this passage the apostle 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 church. 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, and once we all come in the unity of the faith and become perfect (which *will* happen one day!), pastors and teachers will no longer be needed. Their job will be done. (Incidentally, that's why we no longer have apostles or prophets. Their job has been finished so those offices have been abolished. Since the church has been established there's no need for apostles, and since we have the completed Bible there's no need for prophets either.)

If teachers can learn to bridle their tongue and teach only what's right then they can be tremendously effective. Once they master that ability they can fulfill the purposes Paul spoke of in Ephesians: they can edify the church and further the work of the ministry.

James offers several analogies to explain what he means:

**James 3:3-4:** “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.”

By the use of relatively small “bits”, people can make horses (animals that are much larger than people!) go wherever they want them to go. Likewise, all it takes to turn a large ship is a small helm. The governor (or pilot) of the ship can direct the enormous vessel by making small changes to a small helm. The point is that a small device can have a tremendous impact on the bearing of a much larger object. As James explains, 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. Compared to the size of the body it's really pretty insignificant. Yet the tongue is a powerful thing! Words carry a tremendous amount of weight, for good or for evil. The tongue's importance is far greater than its size. Words can start a fight or end one. They can build cities or burn them down. They can end wars or begin them. They can encourage people or destroy them. They can make your enemy your friend, or make your friend your enemy. The tongue may be small but it can cause terrible trouble and kindle enormous fires.

Words are exceedingly dangerous and we must use them with care. When words are used well they 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 course of history. However, words can also cause tremendous destruction:

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

This verse compares a few lying words to death itself! Lies are made up of words – destructive, terrible words that can lead to the end of relationships, the death of innocent people, and the fall 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 is our tongue? It's 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 book of Proverbs compares the words of evil men to fire:

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

It's easy to gossip or spread evil. However, spreading evil is like lighting a fire: before you know it there's a huge blaze that's impossible to control. Evil words can destroy innocent lives and ruin reputations. It's easy to dig up evil and spread it, but once a fire has started it can quickly 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.”

The point is that we need to stop and think about our words. It's easy to be hateful or deceptive or tear others down. Gossip is easy. Spreading lies is easy. Speaking evil of others is easy. These sort of words have destroyed churches and split congregations apart. Our words have great power and we must use them with care.

James warned us that the tongue is more dangerous than we realize:

**James 3:7-8:** “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.”

James points out that it's possible to tame all sorts of animals. With enough time, effort, and skill, it's possible to work with different types of animals and tame them – including animals that are highly dangerous in the wild.

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

**Mark 5:2-5:** "And when he was come out of the ship, immediately there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit, Who had his dwelling among the tombs; and no man could bind him, no, not with chains: 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. 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 couldn't even bind him with chains! They tried to tame him but they utterly failed. Nothing they did made any difference.

The Bible tells us how this story ends: Jesus came along and cast out the demons and made the man whole. He did what no one else could do, and He tamed that which no one else could tame. What was impossible with men was possible with God.

The tongue is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. It's possible to tame a cat or a dog, but your tongue can *never* be fully trusted. You must never give your tongue free reign to do whatever it pleases! You must always be watching and on your guard. You can't set your tongue free because it's deadly. You must use the power of God to control it. This is a battle that all of us will have to fight until the Lord calls us home. We must never

let up.

James goes on to point out the deceitful nature of our tongue:

**James 3:9-12:** “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.”

There are some people who go to church and praise God, and then go home and curse their neighbor. They speak highly of God and then speak evil of people who are made in His image. This is an example of how dangerous our tongues really are.

This doesn't mean that we must never criticize other people. It doesn't mean we must turn a blind eye to sin. Some people think that if you don't have anything nice to say then you shouldn't say anything at all. However, that's not Biblical. Jesus didn't hesitate to condemn people who needed it:

**Matthew 23:27-33:** “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. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous, 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. Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets. Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers. Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?"

Jesus isn't the only one who confronted people over their sin. The apostles did it as well. In fact, they even named names:

**I Timothy 1:19-20:** "Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck: 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 1:9-10:** "I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. 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.”

Some people claim that Jesus said we shouldn't judge each other, but that's not what He said at all. The apostles judged people and even called them out by name. What Jesus actually said was that we shouldn't condemn people for things that we're doing ourselves:

**Matthew 7:1-5:** “Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? 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? 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? He didn't say “Whatever you do, don't ever judge anyone.” Instead He said that we should stop sinning ourselves *so we can see clearly to help those around us!* What Jesus condemned was *hypocrisy*.

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

**James 5:19-20:** “Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; 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 didn't say "If you see someone caught up in sin, don't judge them." Instead he taught that we should *tell him* and help him overcome his sin. We should seek to help him 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 hypocrisy and self-righteousness because otherwise they had no hope of being saved. They needed to be told they were morally bankrupt so they would repent and seek God's forgiveness and grace. It was a hard message but it was one they needed to hear.

We must act with wisdom, love, and 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 demonstrate 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. In short, they should use their words for good and not for evil.

If you spend your life telling other people how great you are then you've lost your way. If you use your words to impress others then you're in darkness. Meekness doesn't boast about itself! Love doesn't seek its own. Our works of love, works of service, and works of kindness should speak for themselves. Our lives and actions should do the talking.

We must use our words for the edification of the church and the glorification of God. Let him who boasts boast in the Lord. Words of envy and self-glorification don't come from God:

**James 3:14-16:** “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.”

Words that are from above seek to do the Lord's will. They seek many godly and righteous things: to edify others, to guide them to God, to glorify the Father, to worship our Savior, to follow the Spirit, and to do what's right and holy. They are words which are about the Father's business.

However, words that are full of envy and strife and self-glorification are from Hell. Those words are of the devil and aren't fitting for a Christian. Envy and strife are characteristics of the devil's work. The words which come from God are very different:

**James 3:17-18:** “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 the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.”

Notice how differently godly wisdom is! Heavenly wisdom and Heavenly words are pure. There's nothing evil or dark about those words, and there's nothing in them that makes a lie. Those words are holy, honest, and true.

Heavenly words are peaceable, and seek to stop fights instead of start them. They calm anger instead of stirring it up. They seek peace – God's peace. They're not words of strife or bitterness but words of healing. Heavenly wisdom is characterized by gentleness, not harshness. It's merciful and without partiality or hypocrisy. There's no favoritism, but instead

true justice and honesty. Those words are sown in peace, not in war – in goodness, not in evil.

That's the sort of wisdom we must seek, and those are the sort of words we must speak.