

JAMES 3:1-18**ONE'S SPEECH MUST BE BASED ON THE WORD OF GOD (3:1-12)**

The speech of a man reveals his heart states the Sermon on the Mount. For with the mouth man justifies his behavior. From 1:13, “Do not say when you are tempted . . .” to 2:14, “. . . “if a man says he has faith . . . “ the tongue constantly speaks one’s character in justifying himself or in applying his own sense of justice to another. It will soon be said that if one curses one’s brother and then blesses God it reveals their character as double-minded, which is a great defect according to James’ theology. The tongue in James is what controls the body. Thus what James is saying is that the character (double-minded or wisdom of God) runs the tongue (confession, boasting, etc.) and the body follows the character driven tongue. Should the tongue change, so also the actions of the body.

- E. The tongue must be controlled in order to represent God as a doer (confession of *hesed*) (3:1-12).

The antagonist, having denied the poor brother food and clothing in 2:14-17, having been condemned for not responding with *hesed*, is now rebuked by James for judging his brother in word. This man is perceiving this brother as unrighteous, and himself as self-righteous, and then condemning him verbally. He is doing what Deuteronomy warned him not to do, condemn or judge a brother with partiality (2:1) based on his external attributes; rich or poor.

1. Those who elevate themselves as speakers¹ of God's Word need to act according to the wisdom of God, *hesed*, for judgment is merciless to those who do not extend mercy. (3:1).

*Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren,
knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.*

Μὴ πολλοὶ διδάσκαλοι γίνεσθε, ἀδελφοί μου, εἰδότες ὅτι
μειζὸν κρίμα λημψόμεθα.

This is somewhat of a difficult statement that is casually passed over by most interpreters. It is related to 2:13 where judgment will be merciless to the one who shows no mercy. In

¹ James appears to be referring to Matt. 23:8 where Jesus warns against being called “teacher, for One is your teacher”. There the Pharisees teach righteous activities but do not do them, similar to the unequal judging that they do.

addition, this is mercy that is lacking in one's speech, self-justification, or teaching, i.e., shown in speech. It would appear on the surface like he is saying that "some" should be teachers, and one should be very careful to assign himself that position. However, in the nature of James' speech, he appears to be warning all against lack of careful speaking regarding a brother and so the context following. God will judge this speaking against a brother. The point here is that the judgment takes place through the mouth when one condemns his brother. The proper pronouncement here is that he is exhorting them not to be quick to speak but slow to speak (against a brother) as in 1:19. Thus, he at minimum is advocating that one is very careful about their speech regarding their justification. However, he does seem to be allocating some to a position of "teaching," which means that they are the advocates of doctrine, elevating themselves above the community based on their insight into truth. Thus if they are advocating self-righteousness in the assembly they are like those in Matthew 18 who are causing the "little ones" (i.e., believers) to stumble.

2. Controlling the tongue so it does not speak as the world does is primary to the control of the actions (3:2).

² For 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.

πολλὰ γὰρ πταίομεν ἅπαντες. εἴ τις ἐν λόγῳ οὐ πταίει, οὗτος τέλειος ἀνὴρ δυνατὸς χαλιναγωγῆσαι καὶ ὅλον τὸ σῶμα.

Since one is motivated (character) by his position before others and elevation over another, it is through speaking that he does this. Thus his character judgment is made in speech. If he can control his speech (from his character) then he will function correctly in his actions.

[Sermon on the Mount]: The Sermon speaks of false prophets who lead others astray through the teaching of (their own) self-righteousness. Matthew 18 speaks of these same ones who are warned with serious consequences because they teach others regarding self-righteousness. In fact, the judgments of Matthew 18 are toward self-righteousness in the church.

3. A large horse is controlled by controlling his mouth, and a ship is controlled on the seas by a small rudder, thus is the tongue; a small

member which shows the worldliness of a man by his boasting (3:3-5a).

³ *Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well.⁴ Look 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.⁵ So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things.*

εἰ δὲ τῶν ἵππων τοὺς χαλινούς εἰς τὰ στόματα βάλλομεν εἰς τὸ πείθεσθαι αὐτοὺς ἡμῖν, καὶ ὅλον τὸ σῶμα αὐτῶν μετάγομεν. ἰδοὺ καὶ τὰ πλοῖα τηλικαῦτα ὄντα καὶ ὑπὸ ἀνέμων σκληρῶν ἐλαυνόμενα, μετάγεται ὑπὸ ἐλαχίστου πηδαλίου ὅπου ἡ ὀρμὴ τοῦ εὐθύνοντος βούλεται, οὕτως καὶ ἡ γλῶσσα μικρὸν μέλος ἐστὶν καὶ μεγάλα ἀρχεῖ.

The substance of this is in the last verse. The tongue is what communicates the person's identity and it can, and does, elevate one far beyond their actual person in boasting. This is what James is getting at. The person is depraved in need of great mercy from God yet boasts in their own self-righteousness and their body's actions follow right along.

4. The tongue is like a fire, whose source is from Satan. As a fire devours a whole forest, so the evil of the tongue can make the whole body against² God (3:5b-6).³

See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!⁶ And the tongue is a fire, the very world of unrighteousness; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the birth of life, and is set on fire by hell (lit.: gehenna).

ἰδοὺ ἡλίκον πῦρ ἡλίκην ὕλην ἀνάπτει· καὶ ἡ γλῶσσα πῦρ· ὁ κόσμος τῆς ἀδικίας ἡ γλῶσσα καθίσταται ἐν τοῖς μέλεσιν ἡμῶν, ἡ σπιλοῦσα ὅλον τὸ σῶμα καὶ φλογίζουσα τὸν τροχὸν τῆς γενέσεως καὶ φλογιζομένη ὑπὸ τῆς γεέννης.

² The word here for “defiled” is used only here and in Jude 1:23 in the New Testament. Interestingly it is not used by any of those disciples who walked with Jesus, but only by family members (Jude and James are thought to be the half-brothers of Jesus.).

³ cf. Matt. 12:34

For James it is quite simple. Words come from the character. If one's character can control the words (self-justification), then the body (deeds) will follow. However, the opposite may happen which is cursing (judging) and this is straight from the pit of Satan as source. This conforms to 3:15 where it shows that this wisdom is earthy and demonic.

5. The tongue is unable to be tamed as animals are: It blesses God, but curses men, who are the representatives of God (3:7-10).

⁷ For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. ⁸ But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; ¹⁰ from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.

⁷ πᾶσα γὰρ φύσις θηρίων τε καὶ πετεινῶν, ἐρπετῶν τε καὶ ἑναλίων δαμάζεται καὶ δεδάμασται τῇ φύσει τῆ ἀνθρωπίνῃ, ⁸ τὴν δὲ γλῶσσαν οὐδεὶς δαμάσαι δύναται ἀνθρώπων, ἀκατάστατον κακόν, μεστή ἰοῦ θανατηφόρου. ⁹ ἐν αὐτῇ εὐλογοῦμεν τὸν κύριον καὶ πατέρα καὶ ἐν αὐτῇ καταρώμεθα τοὺς ἀνθρώπους τοὺς καθ' ὁμοίωσιν θεοῦ γεγονότας, ¹⁰ ἐκ τοῦ αὐτοῦ στόματος ἐξέρχεται εὐλογία καὶ κατάρα. οὐ κρί, ἀδελφοί μου, ταῦτα οὕτως γίνεσθαι.

James first begins some philosophy of which he includes himself in (“we”), thus indicating a broad lesson. Here, James expresses the 10 commandments where the first four are vertical towards God and the last six toward the brothers. Thus, James states it is a contradiction to look at God's character and bless it, yet curse the brother whom God has made in His likeness and image, which makes all men brothers or neighbors. In addition, this is a continuation of the tongue dialogue, and thus James indicates once more that the tongue is revealing the character (uncontrolled) as it spews forth a curse (judgment) on the brother. The word for “restless” is “unstable” which goes with all the other characteristics of man's heart. It is an unstable foundation.

6. The results of the tongue show where the heart is, either based in the world, or in God; like a fountain which brings forth one kind of water, a fig tree which brings forth figs, and salt water produces salt water, not fresh. (3:11-12).

11 Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? 12 Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Neither can salt water produce fresh.

μήτι ἡ πηγὴ ἐκ τῆς αὐτῆς ὀπῆς βρῦει τὸ γλυκὺ καὶ τὸ πικρὸν; μὴ δύναται, ἀδελφοί μου, συκῆ ἐλαίας ποιῆσαι ἢ ἄμπελος σῦκα; οὔτε ἄλυκὸν γλυκὺ ποιῆσαι ὕδωρ.

This verse seemingly introduces a problem. Is James saying that one either is totally evil (bitter water from bitter well) or totally good (fresh water from fresh well)? That is not the case. What is the case is that the self-righteous believer (blessing and cursing coming from same mouth) is claiming to be from God completely. Just like in 1:13-16, James states that it is not from God, but from Satan. In other words if blessing and cursing comes forth, that is, a claim to be of God (blessing) yet treating their brother with evil (cursing), then they are sourced from a well that is evil, i.e., bitter water. None of it is coming from God, i.e., fresh water. If one is blessing God and the brother then they are complete, i.e, fresh water well.

What James is saying to these self-righteous readers, is that their behavior toward their brothers demonstrates an evil heart (the source). These people are having a major problem identifying their source. They state that it is of God. James says it is natural and thus depraved. They are double-minded, blessing God and cursing brother. Thus their perception is totally wrong since it is not from God.

- F. The identification of God's wisdom as the source is clear-cut (3:13-18).
1. Humility before brothers shows God's wisdom as the source coming from *hesed* (3:13).

Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good (i.e., godly) behavior his works (i.e., hesed) in the gentleness of wisdom.

Τίς σοφὸς καὶ ἐπιστήμων ἐν ὑμῖν; δειξάτω ἐκ τῆς καλῆς ἀναστροφῆς τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ ἐν πραύτητι σοφίας.

Again, with the translators using “works” in the sentence it appears to be results when it is the *hesed* that is being shown. It will result in some deed, but the deed may vary depending on the temptation. The *hesed* will not.

2. Jealousy and selfish ambition reveal that the source is earthy (3:14-17).

a) One is not to claim that jealous and hateful behavior toward a brother is from God for that is a lie and makes one arrogant⁴ (3:14).

But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth.

εἰ δὲ ζῆλον πικρὸν ἔχετε καὶ ἐριθείαν ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ ὑμῶν, μὴ κατακαυχᾶσθε καὶ ψεύδεσθε κατὰ τῆς ἀληθείας.

b) Source: This behavior is from the world, fleshly, demonic (3:15).

This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic.

οὐκ ἔστιν αὕτη ἡ σοφία ἄνωθεν κατερχομένη ἀλλὰ ἐπίγειος, ψυχικῆ, δαιμονιώδης.

The reference to wisdom from above is in 1:17.

c) This human self-reasoning cannot bring forth anything godly, but only evil (3:16).

For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing.

ὅπου γὰρ ζῆλος καὶ ἐριθεία, ἐκεῖ ἀκαταστασία καὶ πᾶν φαῦλον πρᾶγμα.

⁴ This is the same problem referenced in 1:13, when those who are tempted to self-righteousness or self-justification before brothers claim that it is from God.

The jealousy and selfish ambition go back to 3:14 and are repeated here. The disorder means tumult and references the instability of evil and of the doctrine of evil. That goes back to the double-minded man who is tossed about by the waves.

3. Purity, peace⁵, gentleness, reason, mercy, good fruits without wavering⁶ and hypocrisy are the fruit that is righteousness, which is given (sown) to those who emulate God, desiring peace (3:17-18).

¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure⁷, then peaceable⁸, gentle⁹, reasonable, full of mercy¹⁰ and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy.¹⁸ And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace to¹¹ those who make peace.¹²

¹⁷ ἡ δὲ ἄνωθεν σοφία πρῶτον μὲν ἀγνή ἐστίν, ἔπειτα εἰρηνική, ἐπιεικής, εὐπειθής, μεστή ἐλέους καὶ καρπῶν ἀγαθῶν, ἀδιάκριτος, ἀνυπόκριτος.¹⁸ καρπὸς δὲ δικαιοσύνης ἐν εἰρήνῃ σπείρεται τοῖς ποιοῦσιν εἰρήνην.

⁵ Note that the “peacemakers” is used in Matthew 5:9. Notice also that the fruits are “righteousness” which is the same as the use in Matthew 7:16ff.

⁶ This is referring to of God in 1:17. He does not turn nor shift.

⁷ Matthew 5:8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

⁸ Matthew 5:9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

⁹ Matthew 5:5 "Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.

¹⁰ Matthew 5:7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

¹¹ This is a dative articular participle, which would probably indicate “to” or “for” instead of “by” as is normally translated. Thus the meaning is the seed is sown in the believer by God for this one who uses it to make peace.

¹² Matthew 5:9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.