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# James

## Lesson 3

### “James Chapter 3”

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**Objective:** To provide an exegetical analysis for this section and provide some hermeneutical insights that will be helpful in the application of this text.

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**Materials:**

- Commentaries
- Books
- Bible Dictionaries
- Encyclopedias
- Journal Articles
- Greek Text

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**Procedures**

- I. To provide a fresh, literalistic translation of the text.

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- 2.** To examine the background and historical setting of the textual world and any imagery used in the text.
  - 3.** To unpack the meaning of the text to the original audience.
  - 4.** To provide life applications of the text for us today.

<sup>3:1</sup> Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, knowing that you will receive greater judgment. <sup>3:2</sup> For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in words, that man is perfect being able to hold in check also the whole body. <sup>3:3</sup> And if into the mouths of horses we put bits to persuade them to obey us, and the whole body of them we are able to direct. <sup>3:4</sup> And behold ships, though being large and the strong wind causes them to be driven along, they are guided by a small rudder wherever the impulse of the pilot wishes, <sup>3:5</sup> in this way the tongue is small and boasts greatly. Behold how a small fire sets ablaze a great forest. <sup>3:6</sup> And the tongue is a fire; a (the) world of evil is the tongue set in the midst of the members of the body, a (the) stain to the whole body and setting alight the course of existence, and it is set alight by hell.

N.T. Wright who became the Bishop of Durham in the Anglican church, and is a highly respected teacher, and author, talks about his early life and why he chose the path he did in life. He looked back on his life and remembered the impact, at key moments in his life, of teachers. He talked about the fact that he had some good teachers and some bad teachers, but there were



two or three that made a major impact. They took the trouble to get to know him, and find out who he really was and gave him friendly words of encouragement and advice. He said having someone that he trusted say one or two sentences opened doors to a whole new world for him.<sup>1</sup> James understood this. He understood how critical this role, the role of the teacher, was in the life of the church, in the spiritual development and well-being of individuals as well as in the development of the group. A word of encouragement given in the right place, and at the right time, is of critical importance. Wrong teaching destroys the individual and ultimately could lead people in the wrong direction. Because of this, people who teach will be judged more strictly than those who do not teach.

Apparently it was the case that the community addressed by James held their teachers in high esteem. In a culture that gave high value to personal honor, such a role would have given a powerful incentive to people to pursue being a teacher. James clearly counts himself among those who teach. He lets them know

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<sup>1</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, In the New Testament for Everyone series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), pp. 20-21.

that this role comes with a greater level of scrutiny from God.

Those that teach must not only talk the talk, they must walk the walk. They must display God-given wisdom through their humble service (James 3:13, 17; cf. Matthew 23:11-12<sup>2</sup>). Later, James will urge the mutual confession of sin (5:16<sup>3</sup>). James applies this to himself as he includes himself among those who make many mistakes (3:2a).<sup>4</sup> Religious teachers in the world of James were those who passed on sacred tradition. The key task for such teachers was to learn things accurately and transmit them with exacting precision. Only after written and oral texts were correctly memorized were the disciples of a rabbi ready to discuss them. This process of learning was done with great care lest the students misrepresent these texts unwittingly. The word that James uses here for they “will receive” (λημψόμεθα) implies that this judgement will ultimately be received at the final time of judgement, but there is certainly a sense that a teacher is put on

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<sup>2</sup> **The greatest among you will be your servant. <sup>12</sup> All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.** NRSV.

<sup>3</sup> **Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.** NRSV

<sup>4</sup> Edgar McKnight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Incorporated, 2004), pp. 371-372.

trial by those listening every time they teach. The word used for “judgement (κρίμα) refers to a judicial verdict and carries with it the possibility, and here the likelihood of censure.<sup>5</sup>

It is most likely the case that James intends here for the focus to be on sins of speech, since this is the topic introduced at verse 2. Teaching in the world of James was mostly oral in nature. It then seems plausible to argue that James is arguing for accountability for verbal blunders and harmful words expressed while teaching others (cf. Jesus - Mark 12:38-40<sup>6</sup>; Luke 20:47<sup>7</sup>).<sup>8</sup> For some it seems shocking that James would speak of perfection here, but it must be remembered that he owes his concept of perfection to the Torah, which was seen as the perfect Law of the Lord. The whole point of purity laws was to establish access to


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<sup>5</sup> Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, in the Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series: New Testament (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan: 2008), pp. 151-152.

<sup>6</sup> **As he taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, <sup>39</sup> and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! <sup>40</sup> They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”** NRSV

<sup>7</sup> **They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”** NRSV

<sup>8</sup> Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 152.



God and to define what was needed in order to remain in right relationship with God and with one another. Following the Torah enables one to lead such a life, that could be described as “perfect” or “righteous.” The concept of this type of perfection is central to the Epistle of James. He derives his ideas here from the Hebrew writings and ritual practices of Israel and it is only against such a background that they can be properly understood. Perfection for James, entails a total allegiance to God and is properly expressed in the desire to live in right relationship with God and with His people.<sup>9</sup> Many times people have tried to live in right relationship with God (in a monastic community or all alone), while disregarding relationship with people. Such a conception would be totally unacceptable to James and be incomplete, and far from his conception of perfection.

James then proceeds to give illustrations of how something very small can control something that is much larger. He begins first with the example of a horse being controlled by a small bit in its mouth that allows the rider to control the horse and make it go wherever he chooses. The rudder of a ship too is small by

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<sup>9</sup> Patrick J. Hartin, *James of Jerusalem*, Interfaces series (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2004) pp. 172-190.

comparison to the immensity of the ship that it steers. If a teacher lets the wrong word slip out at the wrong moment a gracious relationship can be spoiled forever. It may be that a promise made is broken, or a bad impression is given that can never be repaired. It is no wonder that David pleaded with God to “set a guard” over his mouth (Psalm 141:3<sup>10</sup>). James here continues to reiterate what he has said previously in that any pretense of being devout that does not result in control over a person’s speech is nothing more than a sham. For James this is a central, vital part, of what it means to be human. Even more serious than this is the statement that James makes when he declares that the tongue is a fire ready to set things ablaze. We often see this working its way out in the lives of politicians where one wrong word or phrase brings a career crashing to the ground. Unwise words reported on the internet can even result in riots around the world resulting in death and destruction.<sup>11</sup>

This brings us to the real underlying point being made here by James. Why is it that the tongue is like this? Jesus had already

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<sup>10</sup> **Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord;  
keep watch over the door of my lips.** NRSV

<sup>11</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, pp. 21-22.



made the point that what comes out of the mouth is a sign of what is really in the heart of a person (Matthew 12:34-37<sup>12</sup>; Luke 6:43-45<sup>13</sup>). James echoes the words of Jesus when he speaks of the fig tree bearing olives, or the vine bearing figs. Nature teaches us that things are not like that. If a tree bears olives then it is an olive tree. The kind of tree is known, for certainty, by its fruit.<sup>14</sup> Just seeing the leaves can sometimes be confusing, but once the fruit appears the confusion is eradicated and the reality of the nature of that tree is displayed for all the world to see. The words spoken by a person display the heart of that person and therefore are the fruit of a person. For a teacher, this is extremely critical. There are many who listen to their words and they must exercise great caution not only in their speech, but more importantly with

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**12 “You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. <sup>35</sup> The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure. <sup>36</sup> I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; <sup>37</sup> for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” NRSV**

**13 “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; <sup>44</sup> for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. <sup>45</sup> The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.” NRSV**

<sup>14</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, pp. 21-22.

their heart. The heart must be pure so that the words that come from there will also be pure.

<sup>3:7</sup> For every kind of animal, bird, reptile and marine creature can be subdued and all types have been subdued by man. <sup>3:8</sup> But no one is able to tame the tongue of man, an unstable evil, it is full of deadly poison. <sup>3:9</sup> With it we bless the Lord and Father and with it we curse men that have been made in the image of God, <sup>3:10</sup> out of the mouth comes a blessing and a curse. These things should not be like this, my brothers. <sup>3:11</sup> A spring does not pour forth out of its opening sweet and bitter water does it? <sup>3:12</sup> Is a fig tree able to produce olives, my brothers, or a grapevine figs? Neither can salty water produce fresh water.

James continues with his illustrations of the nature and the difficulty of controlling the tongue. He alludes to the mandate given to mankind in Genesis to “subdue” the world.<sup>15</sup> While it is the case that man can exert control over the animal world he still has not been able to master controlling his own tongue. The verb used for the taming of the animals indicates that this is a possibility; James is not trying to argue that every animal has been

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<sup>15</sup> Genesis 1:28-31.

tamed, but simply that it is possible. This then is contrasted with the fact that mankind has domesticated the natural world through their building of cities, roads, farms and the like. This state of affairs is then contrasted with humanity's inability to control that small organ of speech, the tongue. The implication given by James in verse 8 is that mankind must look beyond themselves for help in taming the tongue. The implication is that only God can provide what is necessary in order to make this happen. The tongue is an "unstable" evil that at any moment, without warning may lash out; it is a disorderly and unpredictable organ. The image of it as a death-bearing poison is dramatic and may in some sense allude to the nature of the serpent that poisoned paradise with his words of poison that brought death. Psalm 140:3 declares the nature of the tongue to be like a venomous snake.<sup>16</sup>

The tongue of man reveals the depths of his duplicity as James points out starting in verse 9. With the same tongue mankind will bless God and then turn right around and curse other human beings who are in fact made in the image of that same God. James challenges his readers to ask how can this be so?

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<sup>16</sup> Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, pp. 159-160.

How can a person who has truly been cleansed by the power of the Holy Spirit be this duplicitous creature? A person who does such things, speaks such things, is not receiving his inspiration from the Holy Spirit but from hell (verse 6). The readers are challenged to understand this fact. The challenge here is for consistency. James wants people to follow Jesus through and through; to be a blessing only, rather than to be someone who brings both blessing and cursing into the world. The calling for the people of God is to be of the same nature as the Lord Jesus Christ, they are to bring blessing. They are to be a blessing-only people. This is a high standard, but surely no less should be expected by a people are truly transformed by the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The danger is always present that people will take the parts of the gospel that they like and leave the other parts, leaving the real challenges, the truly transformative elements, behind. This cannot be done. The spring must be cleansed so that the only source of water comes from heaven, from God, and all the water is fresh and sweet. For this to happen we need help. It is help that the gospel offers to us all.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>3:13</sup> Who is wise and understanding among you? Out of his good behavior he must demonstrate his works in gentleness that brings wisdom. <sup>3:14</sup> But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not boast and tell lies against the truth. <sup>3:15</sup> This is not wisdom coming down from above but earthly, natural, demonic (wisdom). <sup>3:16</sup> For where there is bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and every worthless deed. <sup>3:17</sup> But the wisdom from above on the one hand first is pure, then peaceful, tolerant, obedient, full of mercy and good fruit, nonjudgmental, without hypocrisy. <sup>3:18</sup> And the fruit of righteousness in peace is sown to those making peace.


A wrong diagnosis by a doctor can lead to the death of a patient. There are countless stories of where the wrong diagnosis has led to the death of a patient. Sometimes a person will appear healthy and then suddenly it happens, death comes quickly, and with finality. Such people appear to be healthy while all the while something unpleasant, something deadly, is eating away at them on the inside. This is what James is taking about here. It is not a physical illness, but an illness nonetheless, more insidious, more powerful, and more devastating than any physical illness. This

illness has eternal consequences. It may be difficult to determine which causes which, but what James is talking about is “bitter jealousy” (ζῆλον πικρὸν) and “selfish ambition” (ἐριθείαν), a spirit which is always nagging and critical, which cannot let a nice word be said without adding a nasty, sarcastic one. When someone with that kind of spirit claims to be healthy, spiritually healthy, the symptoms betray the disease that is in fact eating away at their soul. They may claim to be a practicing Christian, but in fact they are infected with a demonic illness that if not eradicated will lead to their destruction and perhaps to that of others. They are telling lies against the truth, maybe not just in the their some of their words, but in the duplicity of the totality of their words.<sup>18</sup>

James challenges his audience to demonstrate their good life by living a life filled with wisdom, wisdom demonstrated in works done with gentleness, a gentleness that brings wisdom (verse 13). “Bitterness”, “disorder,” “wickedness,” and “selfish ambition” are indeed symptoms of the infection of that which is unspiritual and demonic. “Wisdom from above” (verse 17) brings something totally different. Such wisdom is first of all pure and from this

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<sup>18</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, pp. 22-23.



purity will flow all the other attributes indicated by James. Its purity will bring forth good fruit from the tree which God has planted in a person's soul through the gospel; and the true nature of the person will be seen as a result of this pure wisdom that comes down from God. That fruit will be apparent for all to truly see in the nature of the person who will be peaceful, tolerant, obedient to the will of God, full of mercy. This is such an important aspect of the person who is truly being transformed by the gospel. So many times the focus of a person will be on their relationship with God and this is critical, but not all that is needed. A part of the power of the gospel is in its ability to make that relationship possible but more than that it makes possible relationship with people, those who bear God's image because of his creative act. A critical element in this arena is mercy. For us to have relationship with other people, for those relationships to truly be healthy and strong, and reflect the nature of God, they must be bathed, infused, and transformed by mercy.

Sarcasm, bitterness, and a contentious spirit have no place among those that are being transformed by the gospel. They reflect hypocrisy and endanger those possessing them as well as

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those around them. The people of God are to be people that are people of peace. Jesus said, “blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. James reminds his readers of this in what he writes here. This wisdom comes from above and in it those that bear the name of Christ should dwell.



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# Synopsis

James here begins by addressing the fact that not many should become teachers because of the greater scrutiny placed upon them by God because of their words. He here speaks in a ligament with the way Jesus did when he recognizes that there is a connection between the words spoken by a person and their heart. If a person can be perfect in their words, that person can indeed be a perfect person. The perfection spoken of here by James must be seen in light of the Jewish background of this work and of James himself where perfection equals righteousness. James gives several examples of the power of small things to control large things indicating that the whole tongue is a small thing is has control over things much bigger. The tongue has great power and James here indicates that it releases a fire that is set alight by hell itself.

At verse 7 James talks about the fact that mankind has power over a great many things, with the implication that this power was given to humanity, by God, at creation. Despite this great power it is beyond human ability to control the tongue, which is full of deadly poison like a serpents venom. People use

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the same tongue to both bless and to curse. This should not be so and James indicates that one opening cannot, in truth, issue forth both sweet water and bitter water. A tree will be known by its fruits and a man will be known through his words, all of his words.

Starting at verse 13, James begins to explain the way of the true wisdom that comes down from God. Gentleness is a sign of this wisdom. Jealousy and selfish ambition are signs of the earthly and the demonic. Disorder and worthless deeds will be the symptoms of this demonic wisdom while the wisdom from above can be seen through purity, peacefulness, tolerance, obedience, mercy, good fruit, a nonjudgmental attitude, the lack of hypocrisy and peace.

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# Questions

1. Why do you think people want to be teachers?
2. Why do you think James warns his readers about the greater judgement that teachers will face?
3. How do you think people are controlled by words?
4. Why can people not control their tongues?
5. Why do you think James describes the tongue as a fire set alight by hell?
6. What are some ways that you have seen words to be a powerful force in the life of people?
7. Why do you think that James describes the tongue as full of deadly poison?
8. How can people insure that their words are not hypocritical?
9. Why should people not curse other people?
10. How do you know if a person is wise?
11. What are the signs of the lack of wisdom?
12. What do you think James means by calling wisdom from above pure?
13. How does peace relate to wisdom?

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14. Who do you know who is wise in the way that James describes wisdom from above?

15. What is the source of disorder in chaos in the world?