

James 3:3-18 - Sticks and Stones Will Break My Bones but Your Words will Kill Me

This week we continue our study of James, covering James 3:3-18, where James continues to instruct us on just how important it is to tame our tongues because of the unimaginable damage that they can do. Chapter 3 can be broken into two main sections which both describe the requirements for a man to teach the Bible in the church. The first section (James 3:1-12) explains how they should talk, and the second (James 3:13-18) how they should live. James continues his theme of living and dead faith by showing that a living faith will result in living words and living works.

Memory Verses

James 1:2-4 NKJV

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, ³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. ⁴ But let patience have *its* perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

James 3:1-18 NKJV

My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. ² For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he *is* a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. ³ Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. ⁴ Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. ⁵ Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things.

See how great a forest a little fire kindles! ⁶ And the tongue *is* a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. ⁷ For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. ⁸ But no man can tame the tongue. *It is* an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring send forth fresh *water* and bitter from the same opening? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.

¹³ Who *is* wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct *that* his works *are done* in the meekness of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. ¹⁵ This wisdom does not descend from above, but *is* earthly, sensual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where envy and self-seeking *exist*, confusion and every evil thing *are* there. ¹⁷ But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. ¹⁸ Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

I want you to imagine that you are driving your car down a highway at 110km/hr. Suddenly your steering wheel falls off and you are left holding it with both hands as, out of control, your car careens off the road, through a fence, and finally into a crowd of people who are shopping at the Saturday markets. You are OK, but very shaken up as you see multitudes of dead and injured people be taken to the morgue and the hospital respectively. It looks like the aftermath of an ISIS terrorist attack.

This is like the damage caused by our tongues. When we are not controlled by the Spirit of God, our tongues are a deadly weapon, and many are left emotionally wounded, feeling dead on the inside, or, even literally physically wounded or killed through self-harm, the violence the results from unrestrained words, and suicide. I can speak for myself when I say that I have left people emotionally wounded and bleeding because of the words that I have spoken; both because of what I have said or not said, and how I have said it. On the other hand, God has also used me to bring life and healing to people, and to bring healing to those people that I have wounded. God is so very merciful.

Consider the following words from Proverbs:

Proverbs 18:21 NKJV

Death and life *are* in the power of the tongue,
And those who love it will eat its fruit.

Proverbs 18:21 NLT

The tongue can bring death or life;
those who love to talk will reap the consequences.

James here instructs us on just how important it is to tame our tongues because of the untold damage they can do. James continues his theme of living and dead faith by showing that a living faith will result in living words. He then uses the picture of heavenly wisdom, contrasted with earthy, demonic, or sensual wisdom, to illustrate the difference between being controlled by the Holy Spirit and being controlled by our sinful human nature in the way we live.

The Power of the Tongue

James 3:3-5 NKJV

³ Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. ⁴ Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. ⁵ Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things.

Anyone who has ridden a horse knows just how vulnerable you feel when you have lost control of the horse, when it is galloping home, and you are just hoping that it will stop soon. I remember when I was riding a horse and the bridle fell off. The horse had put its head down and then shook its head and neck. The bridle slipped over the ears, and off its nose. Of course the bit also came out of its mouth. It was amazing how quickly the horse changed from being quiet, dependable, controllable, and easy to direct, to being wild and out of control. As soon as the horse realised that I didn't have control anymore, then it took off, went under a low hanging branch, and then I was off. It was

like Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. The change in the nature and character of the horse was incredible. The truth is that all horses like to run, and, given a choice, would much rather be free and independent of their riders and back with their own kind.

The same is true of the tongue; my sinful nature has a lot to say (nothing good), but it can't when reigned in or controlled by the power of the Holy Spirit. My tongue (my speech), when under the control of the Holy Spirit who lives in me, becomes submissive, quiet, respectable, caring, truthful, empathetic, compassionate, pure, holy, godly, thankful, joyful and loving. These qualities come out effortlessly and just seem so natural. It seems so strange that my tongue can also be so vile, selfish, jealous, envious, lying, wrathful and hateful when no longer under the control of, or yielded and submitted to, the Holy Spirit.

I find this story similar to many times in my life when I have been controlled by the Holy Spirit, and God was using my tongue to bless others. I might have been sharing the gospel with someone or comforting someone and we were both blessed. But then, the very next conversation I have with a different person, I am selfish and rude, not listening to the other person, and causing hurt to them. James 3:9-10 says, "With it [the tongue] we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so." Remember last week that we learnt that, "It's no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20), and we said that we could apply it this way, "It is no longer I who speak, but Christ who speaks through me".

There are a few important points that we need to understand about the tongue:

1. It is only small, but has tremendous potential for both good and evil (James 3:5).
2. He who has control over his tongue has control over his whole body (James 3:2).
3. If the tongue is out of control, then the whole body is out of control.
4. We must ask the question: at any moment, who is holding the reigns of my mouth — God or my sinful human nature? Who am I choosing to be controlled by (Romans 8:5-6)?

James 3:5-6 NKJV

See how great a forest a little fire kindles! ⁶ And the tongue *is* a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.

What does a tongue set on fire by hell look or sound like?

Proverbs 26:21-26 NLT

²¹ A quarrelsome person starts fights
as easily as hot embers light charcoal or fire lights wood.

²² Rumours are dainty morsels
that sink deep into one's heart.

²³ Smooth words may hide a wicked heart,
just as a pretty glaze covers a clay pot.

²⁴ People may cover their hatred with pleasant words,
but they're deceiving you.

²⁵ They pretend to be kind, but don't believe them.

Their hearts are full of many evils.

²⁶ While their hatred may be concealed by trickery, their wrongdoing will be exposed in public.

What can we do to keep our tongues from being ignited by the fires of hell?

Jon Courson: “When you hear gossip, pray ... to keep your tongue busy lest you join in the hellish discussion. If I listen to gossip, to put-downs, I am actually an accomplice in that fire ignited by hell. But if I refuse to listen and pray instead, the water of the Spirit douses the fire of hell, and the conversation dies.”

Gossip, slander, angry, hateful, lying, manipulative, or deceptive words are here described as being set on fire by hell. It’s a good analogy, as fire used destructively causes severe burns and results in a lot of pain. Proverbs 26:18-19 describes the person who doesn’t understand the destructive power of their words:

Proverbs 26:18-19 NLT

¹⁸ Just as damaging
as a madman shooting a deadly weapon
¹⁹ is someone who lies to a friend
and then says, “I was only joking.”

v 6 **See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity:** “The fire of the tongue has been used to burn many. Children are told *sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me*. But that child’s rhyme isn’t really true; the bitter pain of a word spoken against us can hurt us for a lifetime, long after a broken bone has healed” (David Guzik).

Thus the title of today’s sermon — “Sticks and Stones Will Break My Bones but Your Words will Kill Me”

James 3:7-8 NKJV

⁷ For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. ⁸ But no man can tame the tongue. *It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.*

Jon Courson puts it this way: “Here’s the problem: In our own energy, we cannot tame our tongues. We need the Lord.”

James 3:9-12

⁹ With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring send forth fresh *water* and bitter from the same opening? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.

The following proverbs show how our tongues can be used for both good and evil.

Proverbs 10:18-20

Hiding hatred makes you a liar;
slandering others makes you a fool.

¹⁹ Too much talk leads to sin.

Be sensible and keep your mouth shut.

²⁰ The words of the godly are like sterling silver;
the heart of a fool is worthless.

²¹ The words of the godly encourage many,
but fools are destroyed by their lack of common sense.

Proverbs 12:6, 13-14, 25

⁶ The words of the wicked are like a murderous ambush,
but the words of the godly save lives.

¹³ The wicked are trapped by their own words,
but the godly escape such trouble.

¹⁴ Wise words bring many benefits,
and hard work brings rewards.

²⁵ Anxiety in the heart of man causes depression,
But a good word makes it glad.

Proverbs 16:24

Pleasant words *are like* a honeycomb,
Sweetness to the soul and health to the bones.

This is not all bad. Yes our tongues can be used for great evil, but they can also be used for great good. Look at all the good that our tongues can do when equipped with the knowledge of the Word of God and submitted to the Spirit of God:

- encourage others
- save lives
- escape trouble
- speak wisdom
- resolve depression and anxiety
- bring sweetness to the bones and health to the soul.

The point I want to make here is that our words are very powerful. Some go too far with just how powerful our words are, saying or implying that just as God created by speaking, then so can we, because we are in the image of God. No we can't. Why not? Because we are not God. Only God can bring something into existence by simply speaking it. We, as humans, cannot. The "word of faith" or "name it and claim it", or "blab and grab", as some call it, is a false doctrine. Our words are not a way for us to get what we want. We cannot create our own reality in this sense.

However, this doesn't mean that our words have no power. When the Holy Spirit is in control of our tongues, we can have an incredible effect on people. Think of the countless number of lives that have been saved for eternity through the sharing of the gospel.

Romans 1:16

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.

Isaiah 52:7

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news,
Who proclaims peace, who brings glad tidings of good *things*,
Who proclaims salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns!"

Also think of the people who have been encouraged in their christian walk through good bible teaching that have overcome habitual sin and now follow God with their whole heart.

John 8:31-32, 34-36

³¹ Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. ³² And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

...³⁴ Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. ³⁵ And a slave does not abide in the house forever, *but* a son abides forever. ³⁶ Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.

This is a part of discipleship, where the baby Christian matures into a young man who has overcome sin through the word abiding in him (1 John 2:13-14). God has chosen us sinful human beings to speak through us to reconcile the world to Himself (1 Corinthians 5:18-21). When we are controlled by the Holy Spirit it is obvious and we can take no credit for it.

v 10-12 **Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so ... Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh:** Of course we will all make mistakes. We already know that nobody is sinless, which means that there will always be times when we will use our words for evil. But this is not talking about sinless perfection. Rather, these verses are referring to patterns in our speech and conduct (not becoming perfect in our speech). It's so easy to have one way of talking and acting at church on Sundays, and a different vocabulary and way of life with the guys at work during the week. This is called being a hypocrite. Very few Christians swear at church, but many swear at their workplaces because everyone else swears. Make up your mind, are you going to be characterised as a person who swears a lot or as a person who doesn't swear a lot? Ask yourself, "Which is the real you?"

As we learned last week, Jesus taught that "out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45). A person who tells dirty jokes and swears a lot during the week but cleans up his mouth for Sunday is simply deceiving themselves. "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." The same applies to those who speak kindly to one group of people, but then use cruel or manipulative words with their family. I think we all know that the reality or litmus test for who we really are is based on two things:

1. who we are when others aren't around
2. who we are around our families

It's easy to fake it at work or at church or on the sports team, but our families will always be able to see right through us. If you really want to know who you really are, just ask your family or a very close friend. Am I a salty or bitter spring, poisoning those around me? Or, am I a fresh spring, bringing life, love and joy to those around me. Overall, what am I really like? There are only two choices, fresh or salty, good or evil.

Heavenly Versus Demonic Wisdom

James 3:13-18 NKJV

¹³ Who *is* wise [a teacher] and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct *that* his works *are done* in the meekness [humility] of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. ¹⁵ This wisdom does not descend from above, but *is* earthly, sensual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing *are* there. ¹⁷ But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. ¹⁸ Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

We now move into the second part of chapter 3. James started chapter 3 by showing those who wanted to be bible teachers how they should talk. Now he shows them how they should act or live.

Burdick: “James addresses the person who is ‘wise and understanding.’ The word *sophos* (**‘wise’**) was the technical term among the Jews for the teacher, the scribe, the rabbi. It appears that the author is still speaking to those who would be teachers (cf. James 3:1); here it is not what they say that he is concerned with, but rather how they live.”

v 15 **This wisdom does not descend from above:** This wisdom that James referred to was not really wisdom at all. “It is the wisdom claimed by the would-be teachers of James 3:14 whose lives contradict their claims. Such ‘wisdom’ evaluates everything by worldly standards and makes personal gain life’s highest goal.” (Burdick)

This worldly wisdom is the “what’s in it for me type thinking.” It is described as:

v 15 **Earthly, sensual, demonic:**

- Earthly: Having only this life in view — the exact opposite of Colossians 3:1, “Seek those things which are above.”
- Sensual: like animals — just looking for the instant gratification of their passions and physical desires.
- Demonic: Inspired by demons — Ephesians 1:2, “in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience,…”

Of course, this teaching on wisdom applies to everyone, not only those who are bible teachers. God wants us all to be wise, as we read in:

James 1:5 NKJV

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him.

So what does Godly wisdom look like?

- good conduct, e.g. honest, trustworthy etc (v 13)
- meek and humble (v 13)
- pure and holy, no sinful attitude or motive (v 17)
- peaceable, includes being a peacemaker and to be free from worry (v 17, 18)
- gentle, merciful, and kind (v 17)
- willing to yield or submit to others, and not stubborn or obstinate (v 17)
- full of mercy and therefore a forgiving person (v 17)
- produces good fruit or results; blesses others, the evidence of godly wisdom (v 17)
- without partiality, loving everyone the same (v 17)
- without hypocrisy; doesn't pretend to be someone they are not (v 17)
- produces the fruit of righteousness: Poole comments, "either the fruit we bring forth, which is righteousness itself, Luke 3:8, 9; Romans 6:22; Philippians 1:11; or the fruit we reap, which is the reward of righteousness, viz. eternal life." (v 18)

This list is very similar to Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23. It's so important to understand that the wise person is the one who is controlled by the Holy Spirit. In contrast, the foolish person is the one who is controlled by their sinful or human nature. This becomes obvious when you compare the negative or foolish character attributes that James describes as earthly, sensual, or demonic wisdom, and you will see that they correspond very well with Paul's description of the sinful human nature in Galatians 5:19-21.

This is what we have been saying all along. We can't make ourselves wise, only God can make us wise. It's a part of the work of sanctification that God does in us (Philippians 1:6). Wisdom is not about how smart you are, but rather, how godly you are. Wisdom is a character trait, not a measure of intelligence. We grow in wisdom as we grow to be more like God. Basically, we are either growing more foolish or more wise every day.

The fact is that we become like who we spend time with — if we spend time with the wise, we will become wise. Firstly, we need to spend time with the Lord if we are to become like the Lord. Notice that it's only as we behold the glory of the Lord that we are transformed. We need to be in the word of God so God can reveal Himself to us.

2 Corinthians 3:18

But we all, with unveiled face, **beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.**

Secondly, we must always remember that who we choose to fellowship with is so important, because by nature we imitate or model those we spend the most time with. Consider the following verses:

1 Corinthians 11:1

Imitate me [Paul], just as I also imitate Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:33 NLT

Don't be fooled by those who say such things, for "bad company corrupts good character."

Psalm 1:1-3 (also see Psalm 26:4-5)

Oh, the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand around with sinners, or join in with mockers. ² But they delight in the law of the Lord, meditating on it day and night. ³ They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season. Their leaves never wither, and they prosper in all they do.

Proverbs 13:20 NKJV

He who walks with wise *men* will be wise,
But the companion of fools will be destroyed.

Proverbs 16:29 NKJV

A violent man entices his neighbour,
And leads him in a way *that is* not good.

1 Corinthians 5:9-11 NLT

When I wrote to you before, I told you not to associate with people who indulge in sexual sin. ¹⁰ But I wasn't talking about unbelievers who indulge in sexual sin, or are greedy, or cheat people, or worship idols. You would have to leave this world to avoid people like that. ¹¹ I meant that you are not to associate with anyone who claims to be a believer yet indulges in sexual sin, or is greedy, or worships idols, or is abusive, or is a drunkard, or cheats people. Don't even eat with such people.

The reason Paul was so concerned about Christians fellowshipping with people who claim to be believers, but were living in sin, was that the sin spreads as easily as leaven in dough — the sinning person will influence others to do the same (1 Corinthians 5:6).

Conclusion

Remember where true wisdom begins — the fear of the Lord.

Proverbs 9:10 NKJV

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,
And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

Proverbs 15:33 NKJV

The fear of the Lord is the instruction of wisdom,
And before honour is humility.

Someone said that if we fear or reverence God, then we need not fear anything or anyone else.

One of the defining characteristics of godly wisdom is humility (in the meekness of wisdom — James 3:13). If I want to be wise, then I must seek to be humble like Jesus. Of course, this change in me is only something that God can do.

Philippians 2:1-8

Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and compassionate? ² Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose. ³ Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.

⁵ You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.

⁶ Though he was God, He did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. ⁷ Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; He took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When He appeared in human form, ⁸ He humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross.

I'll finish with some more verses from Philippians 2. These clearly spell out God's responsibility and our responsibility. This is not a one way street. It will require some hard work, dedication, and discipline on our part to maintain our walk or relationship with God. God will never force us to love Him. Remember that we are under the law of liberty (James 1:25 and 2:12).

These next verses also beautifully and succinctly (concisely) sum up what we have studied in James chapter 3 over the last 3 weeks. Notice that God always provides the resources before He asks us to do anything. Firstly, God gives us the Holy Spirit to live inside of us, then, secondly, God gives us the desire and the power or ability to obey Him. Only then does He ask us to do what is humanly impossible to do — reflect His glory, wisdom, and character through our words and deeds as we live on this wicked earth in a sinful body.

Philippians 2:12-15

... **Work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear.** ¹³ **For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him.**

¹⁴ Do everything without complaining and arguing, ¹⁵ so that no one can criticise you. Live clean, innocent lives as children of God, shining like bright lights in a world full of crooked and perverse people.

So what is my responsibility? To show the results of my salvation. I don't and can't save myself, but, once I am saved, the choice to obey or disobey (the law of liberty) is mine. God does everything short of forcing me to obey Him — God gives me both the desire and power to love and obey Him. My choice is simple. Will I use the desires and power of the Spirit that God has given me to put to death my sinful human nature and walk in the Spirit instead. Will I, by the desires and power that God has already given me, choose to be disciplined and prioritise my relationship with God over everything else; choosing to spend time in the word, in prayer, and in fellowship with other believers? Will I be willing to say no to sin and yes to God, living a life of humble repentance. If the answer to these questions is yes, then verses 14 and 15 will automatically happen, because then it is God who is living His life through me, and not me having to try hard to be godly — the fruit will come automatically. It's all so beautifully simple; I just need to choose to let the Spirit control my life, to continue to be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18), to walk in the Spirit (Galatians 5:16) so God can live His life through me (Galatians 2:20) and I won't fulfil or obey the desires of my sinful nature.