

James 3 Exegetical Notes

The Test of the Tongue - James 3:1-12

The Test of Wisdom - James 3:13-18

Test 6 - The Tongue

Perhaps no greater window to the soul exists than the tongue. There is more said about the tongue and the way we handle our finances in the New Testament than any other subject. This is most likely caused by the fact that the tongue is one of the most accurate measures of ones spirituality than anything else.

1 My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.

James starts out the discussion on the tongue by warning those who would desire to be teachers. The word for masters is *didaskaloi*, teachers. Those who teach fall into greater condemnation than those who do not because of the influence that they have with their speech. It is said that when the great John Knox was called to preach he did it with fear and trembling. In fact, he was almost a basket case during his first sermon, not because he feared the people, but because he feared the responsibility he had in proclaiming the word of God. Those who teach are held to a much higher standard because their influence for good or evil is great.

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.

Why is the tongue such a good barometer of ones spiritual life? It is because if one is able to completely control their tongue, then they are perfect. One's speech over a period of time is a dead giveaway as to the condition of their soul. Anyone can control their speech for a short time, but when faced with the long haul, one's tongue will give one away.

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.

5 Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!

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.

James continues his discussion about the power of the tongue by drawing upon three illustrations from nature. The first is bits. The bit is a small piece of metal that is inserted into the mouth of a horse. By pulling on the bit, the entire horse can be made to obey the commands of the rider. In the same way, a large ship can be turned around in the sea by using a relatively small helm. Finally, a small spark can cause a fire that can destroy millions of acres of trees. James' point is that the destructive nature of an object is not proportional to its size. The power unleashed in an atomic bomb comes from the annihilation of less than seven grams of matter!

Even so, the tongue is a small member and yet is capable of mass destruction. In fact, James states that it is set on fire of hell. The word for hell, *gehenna*, occurs only here outside of the Gospels. It is a descriptive term for hell, used to describe the filthiness on vileness of the place. It comes from the word *ge-hinnom*, or the valley of Hinnom, which served as the garbage dump for Jerusalem. James states that the destructive nature of the tongue is amplified by the fact that it has as its source of power hell itself. The entire world watched Adolf Hitler mobilize a nation for war with the use of his tongue. It is said that over fifty million people died in WWII, a war started by a master of mesmerization.

However, something else should be considered in the context of the tongue, and that is the written page. As much, or more, destruction has been accomplished through the writings of men than has been through the speech of men. Consider Karl Marx, the founder of communism, a system responsible for the death of hundreds of millions of people. Think of the writings of Charles Darwin, or the writings of other philosophers who are responsible for the destruction of millions of souls.

The point is a solemn one. Words, whether spoken or written, are among the most damaging and dangerous things in the world.

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.

The tongue is untamable by man. James points out that every kind of bird, beast, and serpent has been tamed, but to this point, no one has been able to tame the tongue. It refuses to be tamed. The only way for a man to gain control of his tongue is to have it done by the power of the Holy Spirit.

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.

James now proceeds to the crux of the matter, that being that the speech of a man is a dead giveaway regarding his faith in God. He does this by pointing out the absolute dichotomy between the tongue of the unregenerate person and the tongue of the regenerate person using illustrations from nature. Just as the same fountain does not issue good and bad water, and a fig tree cannot bear olive berries, and a vine cannot bear figs, so should the tongue of the believer not issue forth blessings and cursings. It should not be possible for the true believer to bless God in one breath and curse man in another, yet it happens.

As believers, we have an obligation to live out our faith for others to see. One of the major areas in which our faith is to be modeled is in the use of our tongues. Since we cannot tame our tongue, we need to depend on the power of God to do that for us. Those who claim to believe and yet exhibit speech unbecoming of Christ evidence that their faith may be a false faith.

Some Verses on Speech

Colossians 4:6 *Let your speech be alway with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man.*

1 Timothy 4:12 *Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.*

Titus 2:7-8 *In all things shewing thyself a pattern of good works: in doctrine shewing uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity, Sound speech that cannot be condemned; that he that is of the contrary part may be ashamed, having no evil thing to say of you.*

Ephesians 4:29 *Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.*

Luke 4:22a *And all bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious words, which proceeded out of his mouth.*

1 Peter 2:22-23 *Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth. Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously.*

Proverbs 6:16-19 *These six things doth the Lord hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him; A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, An heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren.*

Test 7 - The Test of Wisdom

This passage gives us the contrast between true and false wisdom. We must always bear in mind that the wisdom the Bible talks about is best defined as “a righteous lifestyle and walk before God and men”. It is not intellectual knowledge, but the ability to live a holy life. Those who claim to be wise and yet live in rebellion and sin exhibit proof positive that they are not wise at all.

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.

In this verse we find that a wise man will exhibit his wisdom in his lifestyle (conversation). Additionally, he will do it in such a way as to not draw attention to his piety or religiosity. His good deeds are not meant to be a show to others, but meant to be conduct becoming of Christ.

It is possible for a person to have a deep knowledge of the Bible, and yet exhibit behavior opposite that of a Christian. Mere facts does a person no good, unless those facts are accompanied by righteous acts.

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

In this verse we find a description of a man who is not wise. This man lacks the ability to use his speech and lifestyle to show his wisdom. His two major problems are:

Bitter Envy - zealous

The world's wisdom is self-seeking. Just look at most of the intellegensia of the day. They bask in the light of their own accomplishments and are constantly trying to outdo one another. They are "ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth." Additionally, they have a bitter zeal to tear down anyone that does not fully agree with their viewpoint. The modern intellectual is a very vehement adversary when someone disagrees with his so-called intelligence.

Strife - *eritheia*

Intellectual arguments are in today. This is nothing new. Remember that Paul, on Mar's Hill, ran into the intellectuals of the Greek world. Everyone wants to be an authority. Whenever someone or something appears as a threat to that authority, the full fire of the tongue is unleashed to discredit and destroy the opposition. In fact, the word used here for strife carries with it the idea of causing harm. The modern intellect loves to see a colleague discredited to build up their own ego and position.

The Greek word, *eritheia*, appears elsewhere in the New Testament in Galatians 5:20 as a work of the flesh, Philippians 1:16 and 2:3 as a manifestation of ungodliness, and James 3:16 as strife.

Those who exhibit the above two characteristics are told not to boast in their so-called wisdom. The kind of wisdom they have is not true wisdom.

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

In this verse we find a threefold description of earthly and ungodly wisdom. This is the kind of wisdom one finds on the talk-shows during the day when so-called "experts" in living make it an American pasttime to discredit and ridicule Christianity.

Earthly - *epigeios*

The wisdom of the world today is concerned only with the material world. It has no room for God or the afterlife. The general feeling of helplessness that is prevalent in our world today attest to this fact. The word used here actually refers to the fact that worldly wisdom is concerned only with the material world, and has not concept of the spiritual dimension.

Sensual - *psuchakos*

The idea behind this word is that the world's wisdom is exclusive of God. In our day we see intellects vehemently denying God and concerned only with wisdom as it relates to humanity. This is the basis of humanism.

Devilish - *daimoniodas*

Here we see the true driving force behind worldly wisdom, Satan. Whenever men exclude God from their thoughts, Satan moves in and sows his seeds of destruction.

The wisdom of the world today is motivated by Satan and his kingdom. Anything to keep men's minds off the truly eternal things is energized by Satan's kingdom.

Speaking of Worldly Wisdom - Look at Psychology

Freud saw man as an individual driven by unconscious passions over which he had no control and which required years of psychoanalysis to understand and control.

Carl Jung saw man as containing the collective unconscious of all of humanity and being driven by archetypes which were models of behavior common to all men. He got this from his own personal counselors made up of demonic entities and a being called Philemon.

Carl Rogers saw man's deepest need as that of needing to love and be loved.

B. F. Skinner saw man as nothing more than a biological organism which had been trained by the environment to act a certain way.

Abraham Maslow saw man as consisting of an increasing complexity of needs, which if not met caused all kinds of psychological problems.

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

Here we see the result of earthly wisdom, confusion and evil work.

Confusion - *akatastatos*

The sum total of men's wisdom is confusion. We live in a moral and intellectual fog today that has no hope, no resolution. The talk of the world's wise men is nothing more than noise. Every person has an opinion, and all are wrong.

The real problem is that modern psychology and sociology refuses to acknowledge the real problem of man, namely sin. Whenever the term sin comes up in psychological counseling, it is scorned and relegated to ancient taboos that prevent man from realizing their full potential. Whenever God is omitted, confusion reigns and men arrive at all the wrong answers.

Evil work - *phaulon pragma*

Another result of the world's wisdom is evil. Instead of following God's laws, we try to work around them. Instead of teaching morality and purity to teenagers, we give them sex education, free contraceptives, and abortions when all else fails. Instead of outlawing alcohol we educate people how to drink moderately and spend millions of dollars a year advertising all kinds of alcoholic beverages. The result, without God everything is relative, do your own thing and don't get caught.

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.

Now that James has told us what wisdom is not, we find out what it is.

Pure - *agna*

The right kind of wisdom is pure as opposed to sensual. Of the several times this word is used in the New Testament, it most often speaks of moral and ethical purity.

2 Corinthians 11:2b .. that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.

1 Timothy 5:22 Lay hands suddenly on no man, neither be partaker of other men's sins: keep thyself pure.

1 Peter 3:2 While they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear.

1 John 3:3 And every man that hath this hope in himself purifieth himself even as he is pure

Peace - *eirina*

Peace is used throughout the New Testament but basically has two aspects in relation to God, the “peace of God” and the “peace with God”. The “peace with God” is accomplished when we accept Christ’s sacrifice for our sins. The war with God is over. The “peace of God” is a fruit of the Spirit whereby we experience an inward calm knowing that our destiny is in the hands of the Lord.

We also must emphasize that true peace is as a result of right relationships. We can never obtain true peace by compromising the truth. God desperately wants to be at peace with us, but cannot until we are covered by the blood of Christ.

The Believer’s Two-Fold Peace

Peace with God - Ephesians 2:14-17; Romans 5:1

Peace of God - Philippians 4:7-9; Colossians 3:15; Galatians 5:22

Gentle - *epiekas*

True wisdom is gentle, not abrasive.

Philippians 4:5a Let your moderation be known unto all men.

1 Timothy 3:3 Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous.

Titus 3:2 To speak evil of no man, to be no brawlers, but gentle, shewing all meekness unto all men.

Easily persuaded, not stubborn - *eupeithas*

The only occurrence of this word in the New Testament appears here. The world is best translated as a non-stubborn attitude. One that will listen.

Merciful - *eleous*

Mercy is sympathetic to men’s miserable condition. Grace pertains to men’s spiritual condition.

Of all the traits of Christ mentioned in the Gospels, this is probably the most prevalent. Christ healed disease, raised the dead, and fed the multitudes because of his compassion to the miserable condition sin brings on man. We can do no less.

Ephesians 2:4 But God, who is rich in his mercy for his great love wherewith he loved us

Matthew 9:13 But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

Full of Good Fruits - *agathon karpon*

The Greek word used here is *agathos*, that which is intrinsically good.

The truly wise person bears eternal fruit. In fact, we can tell a truly wise person when we see their fruit. No fruit, no wisdom.

Proverbs 11:30 The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he that winneth souls is wise.

Matthew 7:16-20 Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so, every good tree bringeth forth good fruit, but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore, by their fruits ye shall know them.

Without hypocrisy - *anupokritos*

Hypocrisy is translated from the word *hupocritase* which originally referred to the wearing of masks in the theater. Hypocrisy is not knowing what is right and stumbling, hypocrisy is knowing what is right, sinning anyway, and justifying the sin.

Impartial - *adiakritos*

The idea here is that true wisdom is undivided. It knows the truth and lives in the reality of that truth. Earthly wisdom is always divided, it “depends”. Godly wisdom is founded on the rock of God’s unchanging word, not the whim of man.