

The Epistle of James

Lesson #8

November 14, 2021

James 3:1-12

1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 2 For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. 3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. 4 Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 5 So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! 6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. 7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, 8 but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. 11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? 12 Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

- Before we jump into chapter 3, let's recap what we have learned thus far.
 - James was writing primarily to Jewish believers who had left Jerusalem to escape persecution. He wanted to encourage – even exhort – these believers to continue to live in a way that would reflect appropriately on their God and Savior.
 - The major points he has touched on thus far are:
 - View trials as opportunities for spiritual growth.
 - Look to God for wisdom in dealing with everyday difficulties.
 - Remember that temptations originate in the heart, not from God.
 - Be a doer of the word, and not a hearer only.
 - Showing favoritism or partiality based on external appearances is a sin; avoid it.
 - Any profession of faith that does not result in a life of good works is not genuine.
- So now we come to chapter 3:1-12, which in the ESV bible is entitled “Taming the Tongue”.
 - You might remember that he includes “bridling the tongue” as one of the three characteristics of true religion. And now he sets out to elaborate on that point.
 - And once again, James comes down hard. The message is clear: followers of Christ need to control their tongues.
- We will take some time to work our way through the passage. But what I really want to do today is give us an opportunity for some introspection.
- You will remember that two of the Ten Commandments deal with the issue of inappropriate speech. The third commandment tells us to not use the Lord's name in vain; and the ninth commandment warns against bearing a false witness against someone else.
 - Actually, a case could be made that every sin involves the tongue.
 - At the end of this handout, I have included the questions and answers from the Westminster Larger Catechism that deal with those two commandments

- If we have time, we will discuss those a bit. But what I really hope is that all of us will spend some time considering these questions in prayer before the Lord.

Let's break it down.

1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

- Why would James sound such a warning? Why will teachers (that is, pastors and elders) be judged with greater strictness?
 - The spiritual health of his listeners is at stake.
 - Some Old Testament prophets only told Israel's kings what they wanted to hear, and Israel was punished.
 - 2 Timothy 4:1-2 *I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.*
- What kinds of temptations might a pastor/teacher encounter, and possibly succumb to?
 - Water down the word in order to be accepted.
 - Substitute his opinions for the Word of God.
 - Focus too much on political or cultural issues.
 - Use his position of authority to control or abuse.
 - Sin in a public way (e.g. adultery or financial misappropriation)
- What about listeners? Is there a warning in here for us as well?
 - Consider 2 Timothy 4:3-4 - *For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.*
 - It is certainly true that those "teachers" who scratch itching ears will be judged strictly. But I think Paul is also cautioning us listeners about ever seeking such teachers in the first place.
- Robert Hiller, in Finding Christ in the Straw, says, "What we, pastors and parishioners alike, must be reminded of is that preaching and teaching the word of God are not meant to help us get to know our pastor better nor to make us feel good about ourselves. It is most certainly not to make us merely happier with this idolatrous world. No, preaching is to deliver a message from God. Pastors are called to attack comfortable, obstinate sinners with God's law to drive them to repentance and, then, to heal, restore, and forgive the broken, repentant sinners with God's gospel. Paul instructs Timothy, 'preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage - with great patience and careful instruction' (2 Timothy 4:2). On this basis, teachers and preachers of God's word will be strictly judged. They will not be judged by how funny, engaging, or insightful they were. Rather, did they preach Christ crucified for sinners?"

2 For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.

- James introduced his thoughts regarding the tongue in 1:26 – *If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.*
 - We need to remember the meaning of the word perfect; it means complete or whole.

- The verse can be understood in a couple of ways: 1) as a lead-in to the illustrations in verses 3 and 4; 2) as emphasis to the fact that, since no one ever actually gets to the point where they don't "stumble" in what they say, then no one is ever actually perfect this side of Heaven.

3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. 4 Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 5 So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of (or accomplishes) great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!

- The word "boast" as used here means *accomplish*, not *brag*. And given what follows, James is simply saying that despite how physically small the tongue is, it can bring about tremendous results, both good and bad.

6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.

- Can you think of other Scriptures that speak this same truth?
 - Psalm 34:11-14 *Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD. What man is there who desires life and loves many days, that he may see good? Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.*
 - Matthew 15:18-20 *But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person.*
 - Ephesians 4:29-32 *Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.*

7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, 8 but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

- This points back to verse 2: *And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.*
 - James reiterates the fact that no one can really completely control their tongue.
 - But this verse does provide a clue as to who can!

9 With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. 11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? 12 Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

- Verses 9-10 have been the source of much conviction in my life over the years. It is not so much that I "curse" people; but I have certainly sinned against others with my tongue in many ways.
 - I will confess, I can be pretty impatient with people on the highway, especially those who are driving in an unsafe manner... at least according to me. As the saying goes,

“Everyone on the highway is either an idiot or a moron, depending upon whether they are driving faster or slower than I am.”

- As we consider these questions from the Westminster Catechism, and no doubt become convicted about own behavior, our response should not first be, “I need to work harder.” Rather, our response should be, “Lord, forgive me and help me. Increase my love for you and for others, so that I will desire their good and your glory. And increase my desire and my resolve to live in a way that is pleasing to you.”
- It will also be important to remember the difference between salvation and sanctification.
 - Salvation is a gift from God, given to his elect because of the finished work of Jesus. Our sins were placed on Jesus on the cross, and His righteousness was given to us, so that now we stand before God as holy and righteous as Jesus. We had no part in it, because we were “dead in trespasses and sins”.
 - Ephesians 2:1-5 *And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience — among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.*
 - Ephesians 1:3-14; Ephesians 2:8-9; Colossians 1:21-23
 - Sanctification is the process of us becoming more spiritually mature, more holy. Having been born again of the Spirit, having been made alive together with Christ, we now cooperate with the Holy Spirit to grow in Christlikeness.
 - 1 Peter 1:13-16 *Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”*
 - Romans 12:1-2; Colossians 3:12-17; 2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 1:8; 1 John 2:3; 1 John 5:3

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS FROM THE WESTMINSTER LARGER CATECHISM:

Q111: Which is the third commandment?

A111: The third commandment is, Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain: for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.

Q112: What is required in the third commandment?

A112: The third commandment requires, That the name of God, his titles, attributes, ordinances, the word, sacraments, prayer, oaths, vows, lots, his works, and whatsoever else there is whereby he makes himself known, be holily and reverently used in thought, meditation, word, and writing; by an holy profession, and Answerable conversation, to the glory of God, and the good of ourselves, and others.

Q113: What are the sins forbidden in the third commandment?

A113: The sins forbidden in the third commandment are, the not using of God's name as is required; and the abuse of it in an ignorant, vain, irreverent, profane, superstitious, or wicked mentioning, or otherwise using his titles, attributes, ordinances, or works, by blasphemy, perjury; all sinful cursings, oaths, vows, and lots; violating of our oaths and vows, if lawful; and fulfilling them, if of things unlawful; murmuring and quarreling at, curious prying into, and misapplying of God's decrees and providences; misinterpreting, misapplying, or any way perverting the word, or any part of it, to profane jests, curious or unprofitable Questions, vain janglings, or the maintaining of false doctrines; abusing it, the creatures, or anything contained under the name of God, to charms, or sinful lusts and practices; the maligning, scorning, reviling, or any wise opposing of God's truth, grace, and ways; making profession of religion in hypocrisy, or for sinister ends; being ashamed of it, or a shame to it, by unconformable, unwise, unfruitful, and offensive walking, or backsliding from it.

Q114: What reasons are annexed to the third commandment?

A114: The reasons annexed to the third commandment, in these words, The Lord thy God, and, For the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain, are, because he is the Lord and our God, therefore his name is not to be profaned, or any way abused by us; especially because he will be so far from acquitting and sparing the transgressors of this commandment, as that he will not suffer them to escape his righteous judgment, albeit many such escape the censures and punishments of men.

Q143: Which is the ninth commandment?

A143: The ninth commandment is, Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.

Q144: What are the duties required in the ninth commandment?

A144: The duties required in the ninth commandment are, the preserving and promoting of truth between man and man, and the good name of our neighbor, as well as our own; appearing and standing for the truth; and from the heart, sincerely, freely, clearly, and fully, speaking the truth, and only the truth, in matters of judgment and justice, and in all other things whatsoever; a charitable esteem of our neighbors; loving, desiring, and rejoicing in their good name; sorrowing for, and covering of their infirmities; freely acknowledging of their gifts and graces, defending their innocency; a ready receiving of a good report, and unwillingness to admit of an evil report, concerning them; discouraging talebearers, flatterers, and slanderers; love and care of our own good name, and defending it when need requireth; keeping of lawful promises; studying and practicing of whatsoever things are true, honest, lovely, and of good report.

Q145: What are the sins forbidden in the ninth commandment?

A145: The sins forbidden in the ninth commandment are, all prejudicing the truth, and the good name of our neighbors, as well as our own, especially in public judicature; giving false evidence, suborning false witnesses, wittingly appearing and pleading for an evil cause, outfacing and overbearing the truth; passing unjust sentence, calling evil good, and good evil; rewarding the wicked according to the work of the righteous, and the righteous according to the work of the wicked; forgery, concealing the truth, undue silence in a just cause, and holding our peace when iniquity calleth for either a reproof from ourselves, or complaint to others; speaking the truth unseasonably, or maliciously to a wrong end, or perverting it to a wrong meaning, or in doubtful and equivocal expressions, to the prejudice of truth or justice; speaking untruth, lying, slandering, backbiting, detracting, tale bearing, whispering, scoffing, reviling,

rash, harsh, and partial censuring; misconstructing intentions, words, and actions; flattering, vainglorious boasting, thinking or speaking too highly or too meanly of ourselves or others; denying the gifts and graces of God; aggravating smaller faults; hiding, excusing, or extenuating of sins, when called to a free confession; unnecessary discovering of infirmities; raising false rumors, receiving and countenancing evil reports, and stopping our ears against just defense; evil suspicion; envying or grieving at the deserved credit of any, endeavoring or desiring to impair it, rejoicing in their disgrace and infamy; scornful contempt, fond admiration; breach of lawful promises; neglecting such things as are of good report, and practicing, or not avoiding ourselves, or not hindering: What we can in others, such things as procure an ill name.