

James 3:1-2

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[0 : 00] So let me invite you to take out your copy of God's Word and turn to James chapter 3. Here at the beginning of chapter 3, James begins his most significant treatment of the great need to bridle or bring under control our tongues.

This, however, is not the first time he has done so and it will not be the last. This picks up thematically in this letter. I amused this week about why this particular topic may have been so prominent in James' mind as he penned this letter.

And while I cannot know with certainty why, perhaps it was because he was keenly aware of his own failure in this matter. He writes in verse 2 of chapter 3, our text today, For we all stumble in many ways.

Recall that this James is Jesus' half-brother, the firstborn likely to Mary and Joseph. So he's most likely the next eldest brother to Jesus.

As when Jesus' brother's names are listed, James is always listed first. This would have been their tradition. So he would have grown up underneath his perfect older half-brother.

[1 : 27] And with the absence of Jesus, he would have given leadership in their family. We can read in one occasion in Mark chapter 3, verse 20 and following.

It says, Then he, Jesus, went home, and the crowd gathered again so that they could not even eat. And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, He is out of his mind. Likely, this type of speech is being led by James, the very James that calls Jesus his Lord. What an astounding picture of God's grace in his life.

Further, he would have grown up under this perfect older brother, Jesus. Jesus' language would have always been perfect. He would have spoken when he was meant to speak, and his words would have been timely and true.

He would have been silent when he should have been silent. He never erred in this way. Their whole household would have been familiar with Proverbs, like Proverbs 13, verse 2 and 3.

[2 : 40] From the fruit of his mouth a man eats what is good, but the desire of the treacherous is for violence. Whoever guards his mouth preserves his life.

He who opens wide his lips comes to ruin. Jesus would have been the only one to actually abide by this proverb.

James must have been painfully aware of this. And so he brings a corrective exhortation to the readers of this letter.

He desires that we would grow up into maturity. And for the first part of chapter 3, he places the use of our tongues center stage in this process of growing into maturity in Christ.

And so we're going to look at the first 12 verses of James chapter 3 over the next two weeks. For today, we're just going to look at the first two verses. And Lord willing, Zach Skilling is going to preach those last verses next week.

[3 : 45] But I want to read the entirety of verses 1 through 12 for our benefit this morning. Before I read, let me remind you, beloved, that this is God's word to us. It was written for his glory and our good.

And so we would all do well to listen to it in order to believe its promises and to obey its commands. James chapter 3, beginning in verse 1. Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers. For you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 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.

If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well.

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.

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. And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness.

[4 : 58] 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. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature can be tamed.

It has been tamed by mankind. But no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.

From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water?

Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. I think this is the most concentrated place in the scripture that the tongue is talked about.

Although it is talked about all throughout the Holy Writ. There's much to be said about how we should and shouldn't use our speech. The tongue, James tells us, undoubtedly has great power.

[6 : 11] Its power is disproportionate to its size. And some people are given more opportunity to wield this disproportionate power. To make this point, allow me to highlight for you a great teacher.

One of my favorites, Charles Haddon Spurgeon. Spurgeon is considered by many to be one of the greatest preachers since the days of the apostles. He had preached over 600 times before he was 20 years old.

He has an exceptional mind. In those pre-radio, pre-television, pre-internet days, his sermons sold about 20,000 copies a week being translated into 20 languages.

The collected sermons fill 63 volumes, equivalent to the 27-volume 9th edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica. It takes up a massive amount of space on a shelf and stands as the largest set of books by a single author in the history of Christianity.

On average, Spurgeon preached 13 times a week. I have a hard time pulling off one a week. The Lord blessed his mind and his ability.

[7 : 26] There were no microphones in his day, so at the Metropolitan Tamarackal, where he most regularly preached, he projected his voice so that 5,000 people could hear him week in and week out.

In his work called Preaching and Preachers, sorry, not Preaching and Preachers, a lecture to my students that was written to students of their pastor school, he said, we need not thin-chested fops. This is why. We need to be able to project our voices. You can look up what the word fop means later. He oversaw the training of 863 pastors and aided in the planting of 200 churches in Britain alone, and many, many missionaries went to the ends of the earth, right?

A man who had great influence as a teacher, right? Who used the ability to speak, to do wonderful things for the glory of God.

In juxtaposition, the world's had many terrible, although influential leaders. Men like Jim Jones, who in the 70s founded the People's Temple.

[8 : 36] In an effort to start a utopian society, the People's Temple purchased land in Jonestown, Guyana. But this effort ended in the coerced and forced suicidal deaths of 909 members, right?

He did this with words. This is how this came to pass. And just as an interesting note, this incident is where the phrase, don't drink the Kool-Aid, comes from.

But they bought an off-brand called Flavor Aid. It wasn't actually Kool-Aid at all. All of this accomplished with the tongue, right?

Great good in the case of Spurgeon. Great evil in the case of Jones. And we could spend our day giving examples of those who have spoken for the glory of God and the good of people, and those who have spoken for their glory and the degradation of people.

This goes on to our day. So let's consider James 3, verse 1 and 2 in a simple two-point outline.

[9 : 40] Number one, the caution. And number two, the reasons, plural, the reasons for the caution.

So firstly, see a caution. Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers. You may recall that James is writing to Jewish followers of Jesus Christ.

As Jews, they would have inherited a high view of gathered worship and rabbinical teaching. This is what would have happened weekly in the synagogue. In fact, the title rabbi means my great one.

Kent Hughes, in his commentary on this text, writes, rabbis were accorded the greatest respect. One's duty to help a rabbi exceeded even their duty to help their parents. In fact, should a rabbi and one's father and mother be captured by an enemy, duty demanded that the rabbi be ransomed first. It was considered meritorious to take a rabbi in and provide for all of his needs.

[10:50] They would have inherited this type of thinking. In Matthew 23, verse 5 and following, Jesus rebukes the rabbis for seeking this kind of praise.

He says, they do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long religious garb.

And they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.

And the problem seems to be that much of this acclaim granting to teachers had made its way into the Christian church. Now take a look back at chapter 1 with me just briefly, beginning in verse 16. Here James writes, beginning in 16, Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above.

[11:50] It's from God coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will, he brought us forth by the word of truth.

That we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures, right? So there's this theme being picked up here of us being saved by God's word.

And then he says, verse 19, Know this, my beloved brothers, let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.

For the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves, right? And he goes on to expound upon that faith without works in chapter 2, right?

[12:55] So notice in the middle of that, this exhortation to be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger is set between this idea being presented that we are saved by the word and that we are to continue by the word.

So it seems that something was happening in the life of these churches that he's writing to. And I would suggest to you that they were jockeying for position, right?

That they were trying to be heard and that they weren't listening. That they were becoming angry as a result. So some of the reason that he continues to pick up this theme throughout this letter to guard our tongues becomes a bit more apparent.

And this problem has persisted in the church to our day. Many men seeking platforms for their glory, not for the glory of God and the good of the church.

An example, this is not a thing new to our day. Richard Baxter was a Puritan. This is on your bulletin. He said, of all the preaching in the world that speaks not stark lies, I hate that preaching which tended to make the hearers laugh or to move their mind with tickling levity and affect them as stage players used to do instead of affecting them with a holy reverence of the name of God.

[14:22] Right? Baxter is noticing in his day that there's a type of preaching that brings praise to men and not praise to our great God.

And I think this is what James is warning against in chapter one. And then we pick that up again at the beginning of chapter three. So I do believe that James is trying to dramatically limit how many teachers we have in the church.

I don't think he's working to cut the number way down. In fact, I would say the church needs more teachers. We need men who will faithfully handle the word of God for the glory of God and the good of his people.

Right? We need to contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints and we need to do it together. Right? We need more of this. It is a great effort of the ministry of any faithful church to train up teachers both to stay and then continue that ministry to the very ends of the earth.

Paul encourages in 1 Timothy chapter three and verse one, the saying is trustworthy. If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, reading their elder or pastor, he desires a noble task.

[15:36] Many have used this passage in James chapter three to make a case for the solo pastor, right? The extremely educated, extremely gifted.

But we believe that the faithful church will have plurality leadership or at very worst be striving for a group of men that can faithfully teach the word.

We believe this because we see the titles given for the teachers of the churches of the New Testament given in plural. I would encourage you if you're not so sure about this plurality leadership thing to search the New Testament and look for all the places that these titles are given.

They are given in plural. One example, Titus 1.5, Paul writes to Titus, this is why I left you in Crete so that you might put what remained into order and appoint elders in every town as I directed you. These churches needed elders still and Titus is to go about this work of finding these men qualified by God. Today, we are installing a new teacher for our congregation, T.J. Fisher, who, to be clear, has been serving you as an elder for quite some time, but we like to do these formal things where we recognize these individuals formally.

[17:00] It's an installation. Some people might call it an ordination. The caution for T.J. in this text is not to be a teacher for fame.

That's the caution here. T.J. ought not be hearing this and going, I think I need to jump out a window. But that he would come with the proper attitude to the work.

To not seek a platform for the sake of his own name, but rather for the sake of the name of Jesus Christ. To recognize that we will be judged for everything that we say and that the teacher is given more opportunity to say things that will be heard and heeded.

And this is James caution that we approach the task with humility, with great care. Jesus died for the church.

You are precious and need to be cared for with the teaching that is provided. So that's the caution, right? I don't want you to hear James saying this church needs to get massive and I'm going to be the only person who teaches.

[18:07] Praise the Lord. That is not the case. What he's saying is that there's a way in which we ought to approach the task of teaching, but to be clear-minded about what it means for us to be teachers.

And so, secondly, he gives three reasons for the caution. Three reasons for the caution. first, divine judgment.

It says in the last part of verse one, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. Why might a teacher be judged with greater strictness?

Because the teacher has been entrusted with this role of teaching, right? It's a valuable, it's a precious task to take up.

Jesus says in Luke 12, 48, the last part of it, everyone to whom much was given of him, much will be required. And from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.

[19:16] So, we'll be judged with a greater strictness, but this judgment is not an absolute and eternal judgment. Praise be to God that teachers also find their acceptance before him and the person and work of Jesus Christ.

I'm thankful that the eternal state of my soul depends not on my success or failure as a teacher, but on the completed, perfect, sufficient work of Jesus Christ.

But, we will give an account for everything that we do and everything that we say, just like everyone will.

But in this case, the place that's given to us is to affect others, to bring about change for good or possibly for evil.

people. So, we ought to be careful with our words, whether in public or in private, whether we're carrying out a teaching task or talking in between.

[20:21] We ought to be humble and quick to repent if we err, always valuing the truth. I have said many times that I desire to be true and consistent.

I really want to be both. I want to be true all the time. Right? But if I ever have to choose one, I will choose the truth. Right?

I'm not going to double down on a falsehood. Just admit that I'm wrong and keep us moving together in the right direction. It is a fearful thing to open up God's word.

Many of you do this in various ways, week in and week out and we ought to always approach it with a sense of trembling. I have said that the Sunday that I stop trembling to open up God's word will be the last Sunday I preach God's word.

Right? May God always work in those who teach his word a humility, a reverence for the task that we have before us because we will be judged.

[21 : 26] James says the greater strictness because it has an effect on God's people, the people that Jesus bought with his blood. The second reason for the caution is our proclivity to sin.

He says in the beginning of verse 2, for we all stumble in many ways. As I mentioned, James seems to be aware of his own proclivity to sin and we should not think ourselves above this.

We are in our flesh naturally inclined towards sin and not away from it. If we ever do anything of any merit whatsoever, it is a great work of the grace of God in our hearts.

If we do anything that will be acceptable before him it's because he has worked in us and so we ought not arrogantly aspire to position of teacher.

You ought not think so much of yourself that you think you ought to be leading others. It is a prerequisite to become an elder in this church that you're humble.

[22 : 38] If I were to ask a man in our church to consider the task of being an elder and he said yeah great I'd love to do that I'd go well maybe not stop for a moment and think I want men who go oh I don't know because I'm very aware of the fickle nature of my heart and I want to be the one that comes to them and says no but you are doing this you're already eldering you lead people in the truth and we want you good those who teach God's word are to be surgeons carefully employing it to expose sin and to bring about change we are disqualified from doing so if we are proud Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount Matthew chapter 7 beginning in verse 3 said why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye but do not notice the log that is in your own eye or how can you say to your brother let me take the speck out of your own eye when there is the log in your own eye you hypocrite first take the log out of your own eye and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye a proud man cannot get up and teach

God's word in a way that removes the speck from others eyes the perspective that Paul had Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners of whom I am foremost somebody comes to open the word of God to you their teaching ought to be characterized by humility if it weren't for the grace of God I would be the greatest of sinners it is God who has graciously worked in my heart he has rescued me from myself and as that position that we come to the word of God with study it carefully we ask you to open it up with us and explain it to you that it might have the same humbling gracious effect in your lives so we ought to be careful about becoming teachers because we all have a proclivity to sin and then the last reason that teaching creates opportunity to sin he says in the last part of verse two if anyone does not stumble in what he says he is a perfect man able also to bridle his whole body

I have a feeling that that idea is going to get picked up a bit more next week hint Zach throughout his letter James is aiming us at Christian maturity and he makes that point here if your speech is perfect then you will be perfect we are to be careful what we say we to be careful when we speak we are not doing that this side of glory we will fail in what we speak he's not suggesting that this side of glory we are going to be perfect but that we must strive in that direction the necessity of teaching God's people lays bare the heart of the one who teaches it communicates what they believe to be true so it is a task not to be taken up lightly I pray this prayer of David found in Psalm 19 often when I prepare to teach this is verse 14 but the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight

O Lord my rock and my redeemer you see I need to be reminded that my words will be judged but more than that I need to be reminded that ultimately I find my security and I find my redemption in the Lord Jesus Christ and so it is with great humility the task is taken up now I know that we have a lot of young men in the room who are considering becoming ministers of God's word full time even perhaps and we are grateful for this I'm so glad for the people the Lord has brought us across the years he's brought us many gifted!

teachers he's brought us many who have been trained and have become gifted! Teachers! It's a wonderful grace for our church I tell other pastors that we have a deep preaching bench I'm glad for that but I just want to say to you carefully consider whether or not you ought to become a teacher at the same time I would say the church needs teachers but recognize that it is a weighty task that you take up if you find yourself able to do other things then open up the word good and true and beautiful then perhaps you should do those other things if you find in yourself the inclination to want to teach for your namesake and not the sake of our risen savior and lord perhaps you should do something else pray that God would work that desire out of you let me give a couple of further

closing applications number one to everybody consider carefully what you say and why you say it and

[28 : 27] I'm sure again next week we'll think together more about this at the age of 19 and across some time a young follower of Jesus Christ by the name of Jonathan Edwards penned 70 resolutions there were promises aimed at God's glory and his good many of these resolutions concerned Edwards use of his tongue and I would like to read you just one of them this is resolution 31 he wrote resolved never to say anything at all against anybody but when it is perfectly agreeable to the highest degree of Christian honor and of love to mankind agreeable to the lowest humility and sense of my own faults and failings and agreeable to the golden rule I just want to take that filter of Edwards resolution and hold it up to the pastor twitter verse he says when I have said anything against anyone to bring it to and try it strictly by the test of this resolution is this the way that we tend to speak seasoned with salt for the good of others so consider carefully what you say and why you say it consider if you ought to speak at all sometimes we just need to keep our mouths shut secondly consider carefully as I said before any aspiration to become a teacher

I love to speak with you if you have any desire to do so and thirdly pray for your teachers it is a big it is a weighty task it is good for you to recognize church that some men step into this fray they do it willingly recognizing that they'll be judged with a greater strictness go to the word of God trembling! before it and we don't do it with perfection but I want you to know that there is not a person that steps on this stage that doesn't love you dearly that doesn't honor and worship God and doesn't want good for you so pray for your teachers and let's pray together