

James 3

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Preacher: Colson Rivers

[0:00] Good morning, church. Thank you, Alex and the band, for those leading us in those songs. What an excellent morning to be here. So glad to see you all here that you survived the sickness going around and the bad storm that came through last night.

If you don't know who I am, my name is Colson Rivers. My wife and I have been members here at Christ Family Church for five years and some change. And I'm honored to be opening God's word with you this morning.

Before we get into our primary text this morning, I'd like to give you a roadmap of where we're going. First, we're going to read through the entirety of James chapter three.

This will either re-familiarize you with a text that you've heard before or give you a great first impression of this wonderful, practical and applicable passage. We'll be looking at four sections of this chapter summarized into these four points.

We all stumble, warning of the power of the tongue, working for purity and wisdom from above or below.

[1:05] After that, we will zoom out a bit and look at some context for James chapter three, the broader context for the letter. As we move more thoroughly to examine chapter three, we will also reference some other touch points of some key themes, those four points, as James is carrying them through this letter.

As we're kind of just taking a snapshot of the central chapter in this letter that James has written. And what the goal is today is for you to see the wisdom that God has given us through his word for his glory and our good.

Let's pray. Dear Lord, thank you for your kindness to us to give us the means and ability to gather here.

Thank you for providing this building for us to gather into together. Thank you for your generosity in all that you've given us to steward well for your glory, to expand your kingdom.

Thank you for your working in us through your spirit, working in believers to make us more like your son. Father, we strive for that and we need your help, your strength and your wisdom to be more like Jesus.

[2:21] Lord, for those here in this room that do not know you, I pray that you would continue to draw them to yourself, that they would see your wisdom today. They would see the great generosity and graciousness that you have for your children.

And they would know there's a gap in their relationship between where it is and where you have offered it to them. Father, I pray that they would act, that they would not harden their hearts today, but would receive your grace.

In your son's name I pray, amen. So, turn with me if you would to James chapter 3 and we're going to go through our read through of the chapter just to get us all in the same ground.

Starting 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. A verse that I read with a lot of trepidation this morning.

Verse 2. For we all stumble in many ways. 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.

[3:32] 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. 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 and 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 to 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.

[4:39] Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.

This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. So now that you all have that memorized, we're going to expand a little bit into some context for the letter of James to his audience.

So first, just our place in redemptive history. This is happening after the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. The good news of Jesus' substitutionary atonement and the new life that can be provided by God through faith in Jesus Christ is spreading out from the epicenter of Jerusalem.

[5:51] The audience of this letter, with the spread of the good news, the good news, and more people are following after Christ. Many of whom are Jewish people that have been waiting for their prophesied Messiah or Christ.

James was a half-brother of Jesus and a leader in the church of Jerusalem. He is writing this letter to these new Jewish Christians spread out across their world.

So now as we look to verse 1 and 2, our first section, we all stumble. Verse 1, James is cautioning aspiring teachers.

We could consider this to be a balance to what Paul is writing in Timothy in 1 Timothy 3.1, where he says, Jesus also gives an illustration more in line with the caution of James in Matthew 8.6, where Jesus says, Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. Again, great trepidation. So that ought to make us very grateful for the excellent elders that we have and pastors over us that have weighed the solemnity of their task and accepted the invitation to serve the body in this way.

[7:14] Now before we continue to verse 2, I think it's important to consider some of the foundations that James has throughout the letter as he's making his point in verse 2. So first, if you'll just flip a page over with me to James 1, verse 13.

It says, Let no one say when he is tempted, I am being tempted by God. For God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.

Then desire, when it has conceived, gives birth to sin. And sin, when it has fully grown, brings forth death. Consider also chapter 2, verse 8. If you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

You are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

So, by this point in chapter 3, James has made a clear foundation that by the time he asserts in verse 2 of chapter 3, for we all stumble in many ways, this audience is going, Yep, yep, yeah, we got that.

[8:26] We've all broken the law, and now we're guilty for all of it. So, from the very first, you know, temptation through entire law breaking, we all do it, and we are all solely responsible for our sin.

So, looking now at verse 2, we all stumble in many ways. Again, we should be able to nod our heads and say, yes, that is true. And then continuing, if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.

Some of the easiest sins that we commit come from what we say. Therefore, they require the most diligence and sanctification to restrain. We shall not be wholly sanctified in this flesh, but James instructs us that if we can get this unruly muscle straight, we can better follow after our Lord.

Jesus also assumes and asserts and tells us that we are going to be making mistakes with the words that we say. In Matthew 12, 36, Jesus says, I tell you, on the day of judgment, people will give account for every careless word they speak.

Not if they speak a careless word, or every careless word they may speak, but rather, every careless word they speak. Jesus knows that we will be guilty of saying these careless words.

[9:39] Continuing to our next section, in verses 3 through 8, considering James' warning of the power of the tongue. Now we're going to actually back up a little bit and consider the letter context before getting into these verses.

Flipping again back to chapter 1, 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. Also verse 26 in chapter 1.

Moving also now to chapter 2, the first four verses.

Here in chapter 2, James is drawing a clear look.

There's a line of connection between the words that are said. You sit here in a good place. You stand over there. And the internal heart condition of the people that are saying that thing.

[11:03] In verse 4, So for James, those statements of judgment partiality are coming from their hearts with evil thoughts.

Looking actually beyond our chapter, in chapter 4, verse 11, James says, Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks evil against a brother or judges his brother speaks evil against the law and judges the law.

But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law, but a judge. Again and again, James is warning these Christians to be careful with their words. Now a quick flag for some wayward destinations that could come from me speaking about the power of the tongue or the power of words.

James does not at all have in mind here the idea that our words in and of themselves have power. He is not teaching against speaking a bad word over someone, nor is he teaching about naming and claiming some aspiration of ours.

In fact, he devotes a section of this letter to help us put ourselves in the right understanding. James 4, starting in verse 13, Come now, you who say, Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit.

[12:19] Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.

As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. Our words have no cosmic power to call things into being. That is exclusively God's power.

Look at Genesis 1. To claim anything other than this for ourselves is evil, boastful arrogance. Back to verse 3 of chapter 3. 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. Now, I'm taking these two illustrations of James together because I think they're of a similar nature.

A small object is controlled by a rider or a pilot to steer a much larger thing, a horse or a ship. If that small object or the person wielding it is not there, the venture or objective is not going to go very smoothly.

[13:26] If the rider of a horse doesn't have his bit or the horse loses the rider entirely, that horse is not going to get to its intended destination, most likely.

Even worse, could you imagine being on a cruise ship and over the intercom, you get the message that the steering capability of the ship is gone. And beyond that, there is also not a captain anymore.

That would certainly incite some panic. So, there is some good first part of verse 5 being accomplished by these small members in these illustrations. And now in the first part of verse 5, James kind of takes a pause from his illustration to drive his point home.

He says, James did not want to lose his audience as they started to exchange their sailing stories. Didn't want them to get off track. Hey, this is what we're talking about. The tongue is small and it's going to do great things. And then he brings it down even more solemn in the end of verse 5. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire.

[14:27] That's a much more serious, catastrophic illustration. As terrible as forest fires are often today, think about all the infrastructure we have to combat them.

That did not exist 2,000 years ago when this was written. These were even more catastrophic and damaging than what we know. So, we ought not to toss out careless words like lit matches into dry forests.

Can we just talk about this later? Or, that's what you always say. It's not that big a deal. Or, if you're in a corporate space. Per my last email.

To run with this forest fire analogy for a second, an accidental match in a well-kept forest is unlikely to start a fire. However, when there's a lot of old, flammable things on the ground, it inevitably will. So, we ought to keep our relational forests clean. And keep short accounts with our fellow image bearers. Our families, our siblings, our co-workers, everyone in our lives.

[15:35] We should be quick to forgive and ask forgiveness. Proverbs 15, 1. A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

Verse 6 of chapter 3. And the tongue is a fire. 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.

The tongue affects all our body through it. From the moment we are born until the moment we die, it is a dominant member of our body through it all. Unless Christ returns, we are not going to be the ones to break that cycle.

There's some confusing or unfamiliar phrases in this verse as well that I'd like to maybe give a little explanation to. The tongue is a fire at the start of verse 6 and then at the conclusion, and set on fire by hell.

So the tongue's sinful fleshly nature is coming from the forces that oppose God.

[16:37] So that's illustrated here by James by the use of the word hell. So set on fire by sin we could read as well. So this is the source of that inflammation that comes, that fire that comes, that our tongue is presently.

And therefore we have a hope that this can be redeemed, extinguished, and then used for good. Looking at verse 7 and 8 together. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind.

But no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil full of deadly poison. If you think that you have mastered your tongue in this life, you have not.

Jesus Christ is the master of his tongue, but we will not be holy like him until we see him as he is. 1 John 3, chapter 3, verse 2.

So we turn to the third section, working for purity. Looking at verses 9 through 12. Reading verse 9 and 10 together. James is pleading for the sanctification of these Christians.

[17:57] For some, it's easy to think that they are humble before God. They may understand him to be their creator and offer some trifling respect. We can think back in James, chapter 2, verse 19, where he says, You believe that God is one, you do well.

Even the demons believe and shudder. That's not good enough, in other words. Immediately, this takes me to Matthew 18, where Jesus tells the parable of the wicked and unforgiving servant, who's forgiven an unfathomable amount of money from his master, and then turns to his fellow servant that owns him some cash, and he chokes him out for that cash.

And so we're saying one thing, we're doing another. There is not purity in our hearts. Considering the theme of purity, single-mindedness, versus double-mindedness in the letter of James, there's a few texts I'd like us to consider in this letter.

Flipping back to chapter 1, starting in verse 6, Looking then at verse 22 of the same chapter, And then, finally, chapter 2, verse 14, James says,

James continues to hammer home his point that we are to be singly focused on faithfulness, and that that faithfulness bears fruit in keeping with true faith.

[20:09] Verse 11 and 12, Does a spring pour forth from the same opening, both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

James is echoing a similar teaching of Jesus in Matthew 15, where I'm going to read verse 11, 18, and 19, where Jesus says, It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a person.

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, and slander.

The fruit that comes from our heart comes from the nature of our heart. If our hearts are rotten, they will bear rotten fruits. But if our hearts have been renewed, they ought to produce good new fruit.

Our final section, verse 13 through 18, Wisdom from above or below. So James is contrasting these two kinds of wisdom that he's defining. So first, we're going to read verse 13, Who is wise and understanding among you?

[21:18] By his good conduct, let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. So again, James is really working to blend this idea of what is said by these people and how that compares to their actual works.

He's linking these together so that what comes out of the heart and what we say is a natural byproduct of the heart and also links to what we do. So let's look at these signs and source of the wisdom that James discusses in verses 14 and 15.

But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but it is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic.

So the signs of this earthly wisdom, bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, and then the source of it, it is not from above, rather it is from, as he says in verse 15, it is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic.

So you could say the conventional wisdom of this world in a sense. Now let's look at the signs and source of, and let's talk about the signs, is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

[22:31] The way this is constructed, James is putting up two groups of signs for this heavenly wisdom. So group A is purity, and then group B is everything else in the verse.

So group A is purity, so this comes first, and then all these other characteristics. So from the purity of this wisdom comes peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

So now let's look and contrast this against the fruits of earthly wisdom, or the wisdom from below. James tells us these fruits in verse 16. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder in every vile practice.

And we can contrast this against the fruits of heavenly wisdom, as James describes them in verse 18. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by peacemakers, relating back to the Sermon on the Mount from Jesus. A wealth of good works done in faith, prepared beforehand that we may walk in them.

[23:41] Considering the themes of wisdom from above and below in this letter, we're going to again go back to chapter 1, this time in verse 5, where James says, If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

That is a promise that we need to hold tightly to. Verse 16 and 17 of chapter 1, Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

Here, I'm going to take this and apply this to today's sermon. If there's anything good that comes from me being here before you today, that is from the Lord. Anything bad, that is due to me.

Looking at the wisdom from below, as James is going to expand this throughout the letter, he does in a couple places. First, in chapter 4, the first four verses, What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?

Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly to spend it on your passions.

[24:56] You adulterous people, do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Are we going to align ourselves with the wisdom of this world and be friends of this world?

Looking at chapter 5, the first six verses, and these are, this is a severe admonishment. Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.

Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days.

Behold, the wages of the laborer who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you. And the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence.

You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. The righteous person does not resist you. God is ready to generously give us his wisdom that James further defines in chapter 3 that he mentions first in chapter 1.

[26:08] And all wisdom of that nature, described as he does in verse 17 of chapter 3, comes from God. The counterfeit wisdom of this world tells us to look out for ourselves, trust no one, put ourselves first, hoard for me and mine, and reach out and take and take and take.

That counterfeit wisdom bears bitter, painful, sad, and eternally tormented fruit. Let us consider what we are to do now with the wisdom of this text.

Look moving to our applications. First, we must strive to control our tongues and if we do, the rest will follow. Control over our tongues does not mean silence, though sometimes it may.

It looks like the signs of heavenly wisdom, pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

Is this how those in your life would describe your words and actions? Pure, no ulterior motives, singly focused on God's glory. Gentle, self-controlled, not short-tempered, open to reason, not stubborn and insisting on our own way, full of mercy and good fruits, taking opportunities to serve others in your life and rejoicing in your ability to serve them.

[27:40] Impartial, steadfast character regardless of who is around. And finally, is it all for show or is it sincere?

Our second application, we cannot control our tongues by ourselves. We must seek wisdom and strength from the Lord. Don't forget, it is a restless evil, the tongue, too great for us to bear alone. The theme of self-deception is strong through the letter of James. And he says it three separate times in the first chapter, and I think we can insert it correctly into verse 7 and 8, that no human being can tame the tongue.

Don't be deceived by that. An easy observation about wisdom from above is that it is from above, it is not from us. Looking at Proverbs 2, verse 6, for the Lord gives wisdom, from his mouth comes knowledge and understanding.

And for proof that God gives wisdom, we don't need to look far. We have his entire holy word. And again, I'll remind you of James 1, 5, if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God who gives generously to all without reproach and it will be given him.

[29:00] And so, throughout Scripture, and particularly in the Sermon on the Mount and the letter of James, we're instructed to ask God and ask God rightly. But that is of his children.

And maybe today you know that you are not a child of God or you're not sure. Maybe you know that you have a problem with the words that you say, maybe how you act too. Maybe you tried for a while to be better but it didn't stick.

But I assure you that a dead heart can only produce rotten fruit. No matter how many layers of paint and wax human effort we put on top.

Before we can begin taking steps towards producing faithful fruit, the Lord must give us a new heart. If you are tired of striving and constant stumbling, James gives plenty of actions.

Submit yourself to God. Draw near to God. Humble yourself before God and ask God. Dear church, beloved of God, let our renewed hearts overcome our clinging flesh and show God's generous wisdom through us by our faithful words and faithful works.

[30:11] Let's pray.