
James: The Heart of Division in the Church

James 3:1-4:12 Testing Through the Tongue

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Introduction

Generally war is the result of a national entity wishing to improve the standard of living for its people. Another major cause is when a nation perceives a possible reduction in a current standard of living and fights to protect what it already has.

Britain for example, fought myriad wars all over the globe in conquest of other peoples. These were mostly wars of imperialism, where the local population was subverted to the will of the English. Ireland, India, South Africa, Australia, Ghana, etc. all suffered as the British advanced. Once in power, the British would establish laws that forced the locals to produce goods for the pleasure of English industry, at less than market rates. Meanwhile, the English manufactured goods that were sold at inflated prices to these same people. Thus the colonial peoples subsidized the English standard of living for centuries.

Fighting to prevent a reduction in living standards was the main reason the English entered both World Wars. Both wars saw the Germans advance into the Low Countries. The British saw this as a threat to their domination of the North Sea commercial district and fought to protect their position.

The English are not the only nation to fight wars to protect or improve their standard of living. Russia colonized Estonia, Ukraine, and Central Asia in similar fashion. Germany attempted to do so in Poland and the Balkans. The French pretty well followed the English pattern. Japan tried to secure a few colonies in East Asia, similar to the English empire. The USA has fought numerous wars to protect its standard of living including two in recent times in the Middle East.

All nations look to their own self-interest in the final analysis. None will willingly take a reduced standard of living without a fight. It is quite likely that the future will produce several major wars over oil, as this vital substance reaches its peak production and eventual decline. These wars by necessity will include the USA and others such as Japan, China, Russia, India, and the EU. All will fight to protect their people's standard of living.

James is addressing the same attitude in his listeners; war in interpersonal relationships, because of unfulfilled passions, resulting in envy and jealousy.

Let's pray...

Let's turn to James chapter 3

The Evil in the Tongue (3:1-12)

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

James begins this section by addressing the desire to teach, and the greater strictness that will be required in what is said and taught. James puts himself in this category, in relating this fact to his audience. The essence of this passage is that “not many of you should presume” to be teachers. I believe the fact that James is addressing a teacher, and/or those who desired to be teachers, leads me to believe that part of the sin that James has addressed in the first part of the letter was being addressed to a teacher, teachers, and/or leadership in the church. Recognizing error in the church begins with the leadership, and they are the ones with the greatest accountability to the Lord for error.

Apparently, partiality in the church as well as judging and dishonoring one another was being taught or demonstrated by church leadership. If we follow this thread from the first chapter we see that some were quick to speak, and slow to actually hear and do the Word (v.1:19); “If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless” (v.1:26). Judgment was being made as worshippers were coming into the assembly and the leadership was directing them where to sit. In chapter 2:12, James exhorts the listeners to “speak and act as those being judged under the law of liberty...” reminding them of judgment for casually sinning in their partiality and favoritism towards the rich. The whole discussion about faith without works...”But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works... You believe that God is one; you do well” (v. 2:18-19), indicating that error was being taught that James had to correct, and there was division over the understanding of their teaching in this area.

In chapter two, in addition to the sin and trial of partiality in the church you get the sense that at some level orthodoxy was being taught, but lived without the fruit of conversion being demonstrated. If you recall, brothers and sisters, and even (based upon chapter 1), widows and orphans were being sent away blessed, but not having their physical needs met.

James says that those who aspire to teach in the church need to beware! Teachers will be held to a higher standard...in both what they say, but also how they live. Even teachers who are not elders will be judged more strictly on their teaching. This is why those of us who teach, or those who desire to teach have to prepare very seriously. Every aspect of your preparation and exhortation should cause you to study hard, pray, and prepare to the very best of our abilities, because we are teaching Christ’s body. Teachers and aspiring teachers must recognize their giftedness and have the conviction to teach, but always work to improve as a steward of that gift. This is true of all the gifts God gives to the church, but in this context, because of the deep impact of teaching and potential error, teachers must be serious about their work. God will judge teachers in the church more strictly, and thus casual attention and preparation will lead to a disappointing accounting to the Lord when we see him face to face, and I am afraid that ignorance will be an appropriate excuse.

Let’s look at verse two:

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.

Why do we need to be so careful in our teaching? Because we all stumble in many ways! Stumble here means error, to fall into sin, or waywardness. So, all of us fall into error or sin at some level, and being a teacher will mean in fact a stricter judgment for the words we use, even in the midst of inevitable sin and error. James is putting himself in this category as a teacher...he clearly uses “we” all stumble in many ways.

The implication in this verse is that a teacher or teachers were in fact, in error. Perhaps the leadership or those teaching error failed to recognize their own error, for James says if one does not “stumble” in what he says he is a perfect man. If such a hypothetical person could control his speech he could control his whole body (presumably without error).

The Jewish audience in this early church would be thinking of Levitical law and keeping the 10 commandments, where aspects have already been mentioned in James letter. James related earlier in his illustration on the sin of partiality in the church and how breaking any part of the law is breaking the whole law. If these teachers believed they were without error, then surely they would realize that all have broken the law somewhere in their lives, and particularly in what they are teaching.

James then gives a number of clear illustrations on how powerful our speech is:

“A horse, one of the most powerful ‘machines’ of James’s day, is controlled by a bit in its mouth. A ship, the largest moving vehicle of his day, is controlled by a rudder, which in those times was shaped like a tongue. The tongue is also powerful, as its boasting illustrates.”¹

In verses 3-6 James writes,

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.

James shifts his argument on the influence of the tongue and its controlling power to the evil of the tongue.

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.

It is interesting to note here that the word ‘set’ in this passage is “to rule over”. So, our tongues are the rulers over the rest of our body, or members). James initially set this illustration up by illustrating the bit in a horse’s mouth and the rudder on a ship, but now James is telling us the tongue is actually set on fire by the fires of hell!

James is thinking here that our tongues were corrupted by the fall. I believe it is important to go back to heart language as we continue to discuss both the tongue, and the trials that the

¹D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, Rev. Ed. of: *The New Bible Commentary*. 3rd Ed. / Edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), Jas 3:1.

church was experiencing. Our tongues are set on fire by hell, and they have no other option than to spew what is coming out of our hearts. This clearly is a frightening window into the state of our hearts (even as believers). Even redeemed by Jesus' blood, the on-going ugly state of the listener's hearts continues through the book of James. But this insight and humbling recognition allows us to repent and humble ourselves before the God that holds and grants us salvation alone through his son!

The entire course of our lives is set on fire by our tongues! Remember how in chapter one James explains that it is by the desires of our hearts that we are lead down the path to temptation and sin, and the tongue leaves a path of destruction and idol worship in its wake. Dear brothers and sisters please know that our tongues and hearts are extremely dangerous and extremely revealing. Don't forget, in this context, that it is teachers in particular that are in danger of stumbling and thus leading those they teach into error. In these churches so far we see favoritism, arrogance, partiality, faith exclusive of works, a lack of joy in God's sovereignty over their trials, perhaps even blaming God for the difficulties they were encountering with economic and social persecution.

Unfortunately, our tongues, like our hearts, are not easily tamed. Perhaps you are able to control your tongue when you are around others, but your heart says the words and thoughts you truly mean. Please hear your heart's speech; there is no difference in our judgment before the Lord over what we say or what we think, or the evil desires that well up inside each of us. It is easy to think that if we could only control our speech (but not necessarily our thoughts), and then by all appearances we are good!

Be careful not to judge others based upon what is outwardly portrayed, and yet give yourself a pass because you are merely "thinking and desiring" sin. Part of the point of James is "do not judge." In fact, how can we judge someone standing next to us, if we truly understand what is being said in our hearts?

Let us continue reading verses 6-12:

For (because our tongues are set on fire by hell) 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.

No man can tame the tongue/heart...it is a deadly poison. "The tongue is always wanting to say something", and that something can lead to death and destruction. We will see shortly how the tongue and evil desires can actually lead to murder!

Consider the dichotomy that James describes: We bless God and curse our brother; all with the same tongue and perhaps even in the same sentence. In chapter 3:7, according to Beale and Carson's Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament, James "almost certainly alludes to the Genesis account of creation in which humans are given stewardship

of the entire creation. And yet we curse those who are made in God's image (an allusion to Gen. 1:27)."

James is especially concerned with the inconsistencies in our lives. Consider earlier in the book where he discusses being double-minded in our faith; hearing versus doing the word, showing partiality to those who are rich and teaching and believing that faith is possible without good works.

This is so frightening and convicting to my heart. Why do I bless God and curse my neighbor (in my heart), or in the same breath? How can I be sincere in my confession to God, and yet I despise my brother or sister? How can these things be so? How can I think of myself so highly, as if I am the pinnacle of God's creation, as I do much thinking in my own heart to bring others around me lower than myself? These are often very subtle and deceiving thoughts, and yet, these thoughts are far too often present in my heart and at times come out of my mouth, and often I don't even know it or realize what I am thinking and saying. Trials will almost certainly be the result when our hearts are so polarizing and our tongues so evil.

One of the aspects of my job is listening to my clients. Clients like to talk, and they like to be listened to, and I enjoy making connections and getting to know them better. I recently had a man describe for me his job on a ship as a young sailor in WWII. He was stationed and on a ship in an Asian seaport, immediately post-war, but his job was to make sure the desalinization machines worked properly. He told me that even a little bit of salt water leaking into the fresh water supply would make a whole ship's crew terribly sick, and ruin machinery, and food. Just a small bit of salt could be perilous, so he had to have an engineer's observation on the gauges, continually testing the effectiveness of the desalinated water supply.

When I was a teenager I spent weeks on end in the summer doing farm work in southern Virginia. My parents also owned an 80 acre tree farm that had been in our family for a number of generations. One of my fondest memories of that farm was the absolutely perfect spring water that fed into the spring house...ice cold and crystal clear. We used to catch native brook trout, and because the spring water was so pure, the trout could be kept alive in the spring house.

Here James says our mouths are like a spring that pours forth both fresh water and salt water, worthless and contaminated. We piously worship God, and turn around in the next breath we judge our brother and sister. This can also happen in the opposite direction, namely, struggling to sincerely worship God when we have evil thoughts toward others in our hearts. James writes in verse 10, "From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers these things ought not to be so", or from the NLT, "this is not right!"

So, what is James antidote for such sin?

The Antidote for the Tongue (3:13-18)

Let's read beginning at verse 13:

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.

At this point you should be hearing a number of themes that have already been mentioned. Remember chapter 1:2:

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds...if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

Now, who is actually wise and understanding among you? Who is it in this trial that is demonstrating wisdom? How do you know who are the wise among you in the midst of a trial? James says the wise man will show his wisdom by his good conduct and show his works in meekness of wisdom. Meekness here is translated as mildness of disposition and gentleness of spirit. So, a wise man will produce good deeds demonstrated through mildness of disposition and gentleness of spirit.

Remember that the some of the trials the church was facing involved preferring and showing partiality to the rich in their assembly, harboring anger and bitterness towards one another, and not meeting the physical needs of fellow believers. True wisdom is the complete opposite of what was actually being taught and demonstrated as wisdom.

The lack of godly wisdom was lived out as bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, terrible attacks being made verbally, and then being lived out experientially by ignoring the true needs of the orphans and widows. James also addresses would be teachers and tells them not to boast and be false to the truth.

Continuing with verse 15:

This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, and 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.

Bitterness, anger, jealousy, selfish ambition, and boasting are not the result of wisdom that comes from God! The dichotomy here is stark. Wisdom from above is pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. James also says that peace is sown by those who are peaceable. There was impartiality in the church and the widows and orphans were not being taken care of, and yet teachers appeared to be boasting of their orthodoxy. Clearly righteousness was not being sown in peace!

James says that where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder, such as impartiality in their services, and every vile practice. James goes back to this thought that yes, even sin such as impartiality, anger, bitterness, selfish ambition, and divisiveness are all considered before the Lord as “vile”, or evil practices.

To hear the words of James and to dismiss them completely without putting his letter in our own context would fall far short of his intentions.

What types of jealousy are present in our midst, what causes boasting, bitterness, anger, selfish ambition, evil thoughts of partiality and judging one another, and vile speech (whether audible or inaudible-in our heads)? Do you pursue places of leadership or teaching positions in order to boast, or raise your own standing in the eyes of others in the church? What kind

of speech comes out of your mouth? Do you praise God and curse your brothers in the same thought? What is the source of our evil speech? Let's read beginning at chapter 4, verse one:

The Source of Evil and it's Cure (4:1-10)

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?

This should cause us to make a connection to the first chapter, when James recognizes that we are tempted when we are carried away by our own desires, and those desires give birth to sin.

James clearly makes the connection that our personal desires do effect the corporate community. We cannot divorce our hearts from cause and effect in the body of Christ. What we do with our desires does make a difference... if we serve our hearts desires, until sin is conceived in the passion and gluttony of our own self-service, then those around us in community cannot help but be stained. Look at what is happening in the churches to whom James is writing.

Reading at verse two:

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. 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. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"?

This passage was such a revelation to me in when I took counseling classes here at the Chapel. Unfortunately, this is a passage we get to use a lot at home. But take a closer look at what is happening. We have multiple evil desires working against one another on multiple fronts. Here James is saying that people are in fact murdering one another with their words!

Now in a shift of perspective we can see the hearts of the poor. We know that there are clearly physical needs that are unmet, but instead of asking and focusing on God to meet their needs, and because the leadership was catering to the rich, and exploiting the needs of the poor, and the poor were envious and jealous of the rich. I believe there was poor on poor fighting and rich on poor. Do not think that your economic state changes the desires of your heart. Rich or poor we have desires that will lead to war, if we sin in order to have our needs met. And we often sin when are needs go unfulfilled.

David Powlison in his article "Getting to the Heart of Conflict: Anger" says this about our desires "Contrary to secular assumptions, nothing lies "deeper" than the lusts that lead to conflict. Our cravings rule our lives; they directly compete with God Himself for lordship. No problem is more profound and more pervasive. James 4:1 says that such God-playing desires "battle" within us. This does not mean that desires battle *against* us or *with* each other. These are *our* desires, expressing who we are. The metaphor envisions siege warfare, an army digging in around the city. Our desires become entrenched... hence we fight and wage

war. We *would* act as peacemakers if we obeyed the Lord instead of asserting our desires. But where you find quarrels and fights, you are witnessing people obeying the desires of a different lord.”

Because of idols of the heart, there was vicious division and fighting, verbal assaults and vile practices, none of this appropriate for Christ’s body. James says that this is friendship with the world, and that friendship with the world is adultery against God. As friends with the world we actually choose to become an associate with the world. James tells his readers that friendship (association or partnership) with the world, is actually to hate (Greek root) God!

Can there be any hope? What are we to do? How can we break the cycle of craving the pursuit of our lusts?

There is only one hope and it is found in verse 6 and following:

But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

God gives more grace! James uses Proverbs to take us back to the source of our grace. Let’s turn to Proverbs 3:

My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments, for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you.

Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsakes you; bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart. So you will find favor and good success in the sight of God and man.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.

Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the first fruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.

My son, do not despise the Lord’s discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.

Blessed Is the One Who Finds Wisdom. Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding, for the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold. She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her.

Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called blessed.

The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens; by his knowledge the deeps broke open, and the clouds drop down the dew.

My son, do not lose sight of these— keep sound wisdom and discretion, and they will be life for your soul and adornment for your neck. Then you will walk on your way securely, and your foot will not stumble. If you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.

Do not be afraid of sudden terror or of the ruin of the wicked, when it comes, for the Lord will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being caught.

Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it. Do not say to your neighbor, “Go, and come again, tomorrow I will give it”—when you have it with you.

Do not plan evil against your neighbor, who dwells trustingly beside you. Do not contend with a man for no reason, when he has done you no harm.

Do not envy a man of violence and do not choose any of his ways, for the devious person is an abomination to the Lord, but the upright are in his confidence.

The Lord’s curse is on the house of the wicked, but he blesses the dwelling of the righteous. Toward the scorers he is scornful, but to the humble he gives favor. The wise will inherit honor, but fools get disgrace.²

Our only hope is in God and his word; we need to embrace and meditate on the person and words of Wisdom, Christ himself. We are to fear God and not rely on our own wisdom. We are to honor God with our resources, recognize God’s discipline in our daily lives, and be careful to not withhold good from our neighbor who has a need right now!

Most of these proverbs directly address the sin and division in the churches to whom James is writing.

The reality of what is taking place is that God opposes the proud. So, even though many in the churches had needs, they were envious, jealous, and had selfish ambition in their hearts so they were being resisted by God. God knows the intentions of our hearts, and no matter what we tell one another, or even when we try to convince ourselves, God knows our true heart desires and ambitions. God will not give in to our prideful arrogance, even when we have physical needs.

²*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version.* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Pr 3:1-35.

It is a lifelong battle...the battle of self-reliance versus God-dependence. James says that our only hope is to repent! Repent and humble ourselves before God. God will give the humble grace in difficult circumstances. We are to draw near to God with humility, dependence, and repentance and he will draw near to us and meet our needs. We are to resist the devil, who is waiting and watching as we chase our desires down that dimly lit trail that leads into the darkened forest of our cravings. Satan is prowling around like a lion, lurking, and waiting for his opportunity to tempt us beyond the false safety of our own desires.

Our repentance needs to be genuine and broken. We need to throw ourselves on the mercy of the only one who truly knows us and provides the love and gifts that we need in order to overcome our sin. The Lord will exalt us, or literally “lift us up”.

Concluding Appeal (4:11-12)

James concludes this part of his letter with an appeal in verse 11:

Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks 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. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

James’ message seems so simple on one hand...do not speak evil! But, far too often our wants are more powerful than our desire for Godly peace in the body of Christ. Sadly, this happens every day at home, in the work place, in the world, in the sports arena...etc....But all we want is our desires, and we judge others in our heart, making them less than ourselves, raising ourselves up above God’s word. We are literally trying to take judgment away from God, who is alone, is solely qualified to be our judge.

James, borrowing from Isaiah 33:22 which reads,

For the Lord is our judge; the Lord is our lawgiver; the Lord is our king; he will save us.

Who are we to judge our neighbor?

Conclusion

In our counseling classes here at Clearcreek we depend much on this section of scripture to inform our thoughts and counsel on the heart of division and conflict. I would encourage you to study these scriptures further to get a firm handle on the tongue and heart as it influences inter-personal warfare. David Powlison for CCEF, Pastor Russ and Pastor Greg have done much work in this area and I would encourage you to seek them out as resources.

If you think you have the desire to teach, be careful. Your life and speech will be judged more strictly.

An unchecked tongue can have a devastating effect! The tongue is a restless evil, full of poison; a world of evil among the body, able to set the whole course of your life on fire!

What causes fights and quarrels among us? It is our passions that war within us. We crave things we cannot have, we do not depend on God, and when we ask God we ask with wrong intentions.

Do not speak evil against one another or judge each other. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

God gives grace to the humble and God's grace is greater than our sin. Our only solution for an evil heart and an evil tongue is the grace of God.

Submit to God, for God alone gives us the tools necessary to solve interpersonal conflict in a godly, biblical way.

Seek God with all of your heart for he alone will make your path straight.



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