



Verbal Faith: Faith's Wise Use of Words James 3

Introduction

Chapter one revealed that faith is validated by enduring trials victoriously and by encountering them joyfully, patiently, purposefully, and prayerfully. To illustrate how faith works, James used several circumstances: poverty, wealth, temptation, and needs of others.

In chapter two, James presented the universal sin of hypocrisy as a test of faith. He described the way a person of faith treats others, how far faith can be expected to go (all the way), and what it can be expected to risk (everything). His examples were Abraham, who sacrificed everything, and Rahab, who risked everything. A definition of faith is seen in the following acrostic:

Forsaking
All
I
Take
Him

God promises that persons who live by true faith and put their trust in Him are never disappointed and will never be ashamed (Psalm 34:22 and Isaiah 50:7).

In chapter three, James puts the tiny, but terrifying, tongue under the microscope. Our words come under scrutiny as works of faith. (This can hardly have been written tongue-in-cheek!)

Outline of James 3

- I. Two Kinds of Verbal Expression - James 3:1-13
- II. Two Kinds of Verbal Wisdom - James 3:14-18

I. Two Kinds of Verbal Expression - James 3

A. Warning to Teachers - James 3:1-4

1. A stricter standard - 1:1

Not many of you should become teachers...for you know that we will be judged by a higher standard...thus we assume greater accountability and more condemnation (Amplified Bible). Why does James warn against aspiring to be teachers? It is because teachers are vulnerable to scrutiny and will be judged by a stricter standard. Words are the teacher's tools. If words are to have credibility and if learning is to take place, the teacher's life must stand behind the words. As faith without works is dead, so words without substance are useless.

In the Jewish culture, rabbis were the teachers. Their

students were their disciples who followed them and observed their life-style. In the democracy of the early church congregations, many stood and taught without serious preparation or contemplation. The result was not orderly or proper (1 Corinthians 14: 20-33).

God used words to call the universe into existence. *He commanded and they were created* (Psalm 148:5). Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Master Teacher, emphasized the importance of words. *Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God* (Matthew 4:4). *The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life* (John 6:63). *He who is of God hears God's words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God* (John 8:47).

2. Paul's agreement - Romans 2:21

Paul agrees. *You therefore who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal* (Romans 2:21)? Teachers must be willing to back up their words with their lives. But they must acknowledge that they can not do it perfectly. If perfect teaching was the criteria, no teaching would take place, ever. Neither Paul and nor James would have claimed perfection, but they were willing to proceed with teaching and to be examples of their teaching. Paul said, *imitate me* (1 Corinthians 4:16, 11:1 and Philippians 3:17). It takes courage to be a teacher.

3. Tripping over one's tongue - 3:2-4

James introduced the theme of the tongue in 1:26. He now returns to develop it. He previously spoke of the danger of the unbridled tongue. Now, he says that if a person can bridle the tongue, he or she is *able also to bridle the whole body*.

a. Silence is golden - 3:2

If anyone does not stumble in word, *he is a perfect man*. Perfection is attainable through perfect speech. Better to remain silent. *Even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace* (Proverbs 17:28).

b. Two examples - horses and ships - 3:3-4

Horses, though larger and stronger than a human, can be controlled by a small device in - of all places - their mouths! *I will keep my mouth with a bridle* (Psalm 39:1 KJV).

Ships, even in a gale, can be controlled by a rudder,

an object which is a fraction of the ship's size. The wheelmaster controls a vessel of tremendous size and power by means of the unseen rudder. The tongue, likewise, is an unseen member of the body wielding great influence. Do you control your tongue, or does it control you?

B. Destructive Potential - James 3: 5-8

1. *Little member...boasts great things* - 3:5

James concludes that great issues and great harm can be conveyed by this tiny member, the tongue. Agreements are made and reputations ruined by a word or two. Words are crucial because of their potential for harmony or harm.

2. Other Biblical descriptions of the tongue

The tongue is also referred to as *the scourge* (Job 5:21), *choice silver* (Proverbs 10:20), *health* (Proverbs 12:18), *lying* (Proverbs 12:19), and *a tree of life* (Proverbs 15:4). Proverbs also states that *death and life are in the power of the tongue* (18:21), and *whoever guards his mouth and tongue keeps his soul from troubles* (18:21 and 21:23). Other references include Isaiah 50:4 which says that the tongue of the learned is given by God and Jeremiah 18:18 which mentions a "tongue-lashing." Which of these references most describes your tongue?

You cannot escape responsibility for the effects of your words. The psalmist prayed, *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord* (Psalm 19:14). Should this be your daily prayer, too? Proverbs 25:11 speaks of *a word fitly spoken and a word spoken in due season* (15:23). The centurion asked Jesus to *only speak a word and my servant* (who was not present) *will be healed* (Matthew 8:8).

3. Accountability

A truly awesome thought is that each and every person will be held accountable for *every idle word spoken* (Matthew 12:36 and Luke 12:2-3).

4. Jesus' example

From Jesus' mouth proceeded *gracious words* (Luke 4:22). Jesus was a prophet *mighty in deed and word* (Luke 24:19). He had the *words of eternal life* (John 6:68). God's word was what Jesus came to bring (John 17:8). Jesus is *the Word of God* (John 1:1-3 and Revelation 19:13).

5. More kinds of words

There are words of *exhortation* (Acts 13:15), words of *truth and reason* (Acts 26:25), *the word of reconciliation*

(2 Corinthians 5:19), *words easy to understand* (1 Corinthians 14:9), *empty words that deceive* (Ephesians 5:6), *comforting words* (1 Thessalonians 4:18), and the *prophetic word made more sure, which we do well to heed in dark days* (2 Peter 1:19).

6. A fire, a world of iniquity - 3:5-6

a. A little fire that kindles a great forest - 3:5

One small match can light a forest fire which destroys many acres of centuries old trees. A few words, or even one word, can destroy reputations, businesses, or fellowship which took years to build.

Fire rapidly does much damage. When Mrs. O'Leary's cow kicked over a lantern, Chicago soon burned out of control. In the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, more people died from the fire which followed than died in the earthquake. Likewise, the tongue is an entire world of sinfulness in our mouths, capable of destroying families, marriages, churches, programs, dreams and souls.

b. Defiles the whole body - 3:6

Like the disease of diverticulitis, one rupture from the tongue can poison the entire system. The words a person speaks arise from the total personality. Conversely, what a person says affects the whole personality. The person who swears becomes a blasphemer! There is an involvement of who we are with what we say.

c. Sets on fire the course of nature - 3:6

The course of nature is translated "the cycle of nature" or "wheel of birth" in the RSV. There may be reference here to the erotic potential of words to arouse emotions. Song writers, lyricists, and poets are not unaware of the power of words to stimulate sensual desires. Satan uses words to entice people to evil (Matthew 4:6). Words carry messages. Do you use words for selfish, unholy, ungodly, or impure purposes? Are you prepared to be judged by your words, both now and later?

d. And is set on fire by hell - 3:6

Hellfire can spout from the uncontrolled tongue. Words may be accompanied by smirks or laughter, but the breath of hell is emitted by some persons every time they speak. Jesus said, *Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks* (Luke 6:45). Hearts that are full of envy, lust, anger, revenge, jealousy, rebellion, self-centeredness, and bitterness are as certain to emit hellishness orally as Mt. Vesuvius emits lava. It all comes from within.

Satan is alert to our temptations and builds upon them by orchestrating events to encourage us to sin. When sinful words are spoken, the speaker becomes his death-dealing mouthpiece. The sulphur of dissension and the brimstone of anger exudes, blighting the atmosphere.

Then, as fire feeds on every dead leaf and limb while carried far afield by the wind, igniting as it goes, so heat-laden words feed on the dead refuse of unconfessed sins, igniting passions which spread, devouring innocent and neutral people in their wake.

7. Vicious and venomous - 3:7-8

a. No man can tame the tongue - 3:7

Most kinds of sea, air, and land creatures can be tamed with patience and skill, from the Aardvark to the Zebra (and the Loch Ness monster too, when found). But no one so far, even with all available psychology, has found a way to tame the tongue.

b. Unruly - 3:8

Some people are known as compulsive talkers. Their tongues are still only when they sleep. Is this you?

c. Deadly poison - 3:8

James completes his tabulation of the tongue by calling it *an unruly evil, full of deadly poison*. Poison kills. Does your tongue bring death or life into a conversation or a room? Why not confess to God just now any slander, malicious gossip, lies, idle chatter, and foolishness in your life? These kill godly zeal and friendships, as well as being timewasters. The objects of joking and slander cannot defend themselves. The damage is done. No amount of explanation will undo it. Those stung by such venom can only apply the antidote of love and forgiveness.

There is no protection from a venomous tongue. The cure lies in the Cross of Christ where sins are confessed and mercy is found. Typhoid-like tongues can be surrendered to The Great Physician who will heal them. He who gives you a new heart and a new song at conversion, can also give you a new tongue.

C. Three Questions for the Tongue - James 3:9-13

1. *Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter?* - 3:9-11

Ought we to be two-tongued (3:10)? Fountains cannot give sweet and bitter water at the same time. Tongues are more versatile. They can manage both blessing and

cursing, praise and criticism. Sharp as a razor, the tongue is double-edged (Psalm 52:2). James says we ought not to be such hypocrites, blessing God in one breath and cursing or criticizing people whom He created in the next. While we definitely should bless God at all times, we should not curse people (Psalm 34:1).

American Indians of the Old West referred to some newcomers as "forked tongues" because they would say two different things, one thing to the Indians and something else to the settlers. Similarly, we say someone speaks out of "both sides of his or her mouth." This is contradictory to a life of faith.

2. *Can a fig tree bear olives or a grapevine bear figs?* - 3:12

Fruit must be consistent with the root. Nature itself testifies to the absurdity and perverseness of the uncontrolled tongue. Fruit from the wrong tree would be confusing and hypocritical. Your words, the fruit of your lips, tell what kind of person you are.

3. *Who is wise and understanding among you?* - 3:13

Jesus' words and works were consistent with each other. His words pointed His audience to God as did His works. A person's conversation reveals much about their character. James picks up a thread from earlier (1:19), *be swift to hear, slow to speak*. It is wise to think before one speaks. A youngster was being taught about gossip by a wise, old Sunday School teacher. The teacher tore a feather pillow and the wind took the feathers carrying them far and wide. "Now," said the teacher, "try to pick up the feathers and put them back into the pillow." "I cannot," said the child, "no one could." "That is right," said the teacher. "So is gossip. Once the words are said, no one can put them back, however much you would like to do so."

II. Two Kinds of Verbal Wisdom - 3:14-18

A. Wisdom - James 3:14-17

Wisdom is a work of faith. Wisdom is given in answer to the prayer of faith (1:5). The wise use of words represents wisdom from the Holy Spirit. Those who submit their words to the Spirit's control may never have to "eat" them and can trust them to do good and not evil.

1. Wisdom that is NOT from above - 3:14-16

a. Wisdom's environment

Bitterness, envy and strife do not come from God. They represent another kind of "wisdom" entirely. No one should ever glory or boast about results which

come from resentment and dissension. James says we lie against the truth of God's word if we say this is right. The world boasts, or glories, in what is brought about by pressure, discord, manipulation, bribery, and influence. The world calls it the "smart" way to do things. Such wisdom is earthly. God means for people to use their minds, but not to rely on their minds as the authority. Logic, reason, intuition, deduction, debate, and true meditation are orderly processes. But, springing from the mind (which is fallen) they need to be regarded carefully. Reason must always bow to the higher authority of God's revelation. The wisdom of this world is limited because it is sensual, natural, and the product of the natural, sinful mind. Science, literature, and education are marvelous achievements of humanity, but they are as polluted as their source. Only the Bible is true in all it teaches.

b. Wisdom's heritage

Satan is the sinful source of this world's wisdom. He is behind the media, politics, and secular learning of the world. Satan has also invaded much of the so-called sacred sphere. It is no accident that worldly wisdom blasphemes God, ridicules the Bible, ignores the Lord Jesus Christ, and perverts morals. It is demonic wisdom and leads to every kind of evil.

2. The *wisdom that is from above* - 3:17-18

It is a relief to turn to the wisdom from above.

a. Its environment - from heaven.

Wisdom's source is pure. God sends it, personified in His Son who said, *A greater than Solomon is here* (Matthew 12:42). Do you seek heavenly wisdom daily?

b. Its heritage and characteristics

First, God's wisdom is pure as He is pure, unmixed with anything ungodly.

Second, it is peaceable. Its effect is irenic. People want to work together when this wisdom fills the atmosphere. There is unity and harmony rather than strife, chaos, and confusion.

Third, it is easy to be entreated, not inaccessible or costly. It is near. Faith is the only prerequisite.

Fourth, it is full of mercy and good fruits, a fruit-basket of good things which are described in detail in the book of Proverbs and personified in Jesus Christ (Proverbs 8:14-31 and 1 Corinthians 1:30). The Book of James is the Proverbs of the New Testament.

Fifth, it is without hypocrisy - the only purpose is to bless, to help and thus to glorify God. There is no hidden agenda. Wisdom from above does not fear the truth or fail to speak the truth when necessary. Wisdom's words mean what they say. Jesus said, *Let your "Yes" be "Yes" and your "No" be "No". For whatever is more than these is from the evil one* (Matthew 5:37). This whole section is too reminiscent of Jesus' words in Matthew 7:16-20 to be coincidental. No wonder some people have called James a commentary on the Sermon on the Mount.

B. Recapitulation - James 3:18

Faith that is genuine and valid affects our tongues in word and conversation. Our words stem from one of two wisdoms, the world's or God's, the earthly or the heavenly.

1. *The fruit of righteousness* - 3:18a

The fruit of faith is righteousness, not unrighteousness.

2. *Sown in peace* - 3:18b

It is distributed calmly, not in strife.

3. *By those who make peace* - 3:18c

It comes only from those who make peace, the peacemakers, who are the true children of God (Matthew 5:9). Motive is all important.

The world's wisdom is bound to fail, for its source is in sensuality, selfishness, and Satan. Heaven's wisdom, on the other hand, is bound to prevail, for its source is in God and His goodness.

Applications

1. Do you use your words to glorify self or God? If your answer is "to glorify self," how can you change?
2. Who controls your tongue, the devil or the Holy Spirit? Who do you desire to have control?
3. How does your conversation influence others for Christ?
4. Will you ask God to purify your lips, saying, *Woe is me for I am undone, a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips* (Isaiah 6:5)?
5. Will you seek today, by faith, to speak wise, pure, good, noble, comforting, helpful, peaceful words as Jesus would?
6. Which is reflected in your words, time spent in the media and this world or time spent in the Bible and prayer?

QUESTIONS

Questions are based on the New King James Version of the Bible.

DAY ONE: Read ALL comments and references.

1. What are some of the things to which James compares the tongue?

2. a. What do you think a person's speech reveals about character and personality?

b. ♥(Heart Question) What do you want your speech to reveal about you?

3. How do you plan to develop new speech habits and good conversation?

4. a. What are the two wisdoms?

b. What did you find new, interesting, or encouraging about each?

DAY TWO: Read James 4:1-3.

5. a. By combining the items listed in 1:14, 3:14, and 4:1, what are some things that reside in all people by nature?

b. What does not reside in people by nature (Romans 7:18)?

c. What does James say people do to get what they want (4:2)?

d. According to James 4:2-3, why are some people never satisfied?

6. a. According to the following verses, how does the Bible teach us to ask so that we receive what we need?
Psalm 34:6

Matthew 6:6

Matthew 7:7

Matthew 21:21-22

John 14:13-14

Philippians 4:6

Hebrews 4:16

b. Which of these verses will you apply to your prayers?

7. a. In 2 Samuel 11, what did King David do to get what he wanted?
- b. In 1 Kings 21, what did Jezebel do to get what she wanted?
- c. What evil characteristic of the heart is seen in each of the following people?
Esau (Hebrews 12:14-16)
- Jacob's sons (Genesis 37:3-4,18)
- Herodias (Mark 6:18-19)
- Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-3)
- Simon the Sorcerer (Acts 8:18-23)

DAY THREE: Read James 4:4-5.

8. From the following verses, what do you learn about the world, whose friendship is *enmity with God*?
John 15:18
- Romans 12:2
- Galatians 6:14
- James 1:27
- 1 John 2:15-17
9. What does James describe by using such a strong word as *adulterers*?
10. ? (Thought Question) What do you think is meant by *friend of the world*? Why does it make a person an enemy of God?
11. Who is doing the speaking in:
James 4:5?
- John 16:13?
- 1 Timothy 4:1?
- Galatians 3:8?

DAY FOUR: Read James 4:6-10.

12. a. What word occurs in 4:6 and 4:10?
 - b. Define this word using Proverbs 3:34 and Matthew 5:3.
 - c. What humble acts does James recommend in 4:7-10?
 - d. List three or four promises which God will fulfill when the conditions in these verses are met.
 - e. Which of these do you need today?
13. a. What three hindrances to godly life are mentioned in 1 John 2:16?
 - b. Divide James 4:1-7 into three parts:
The flesh verses ___ to ___;
The world verses ___ to ___;
The devil verses ___ to ___.
14. List the reward and requirements of humility in verses 6-10. Which ones do you need to practice?

DAY FIVE: Read James 4:11-12.

15. a. Why is speaking against someone the same as judging that person (4:11)?
 - b. Why are we not to judge one another (Matthew 7:1)?
 - c. Who is the only competent judge? Why? (See also James 4:12 and Romans 14:4,10,12.)
 - d. Why is one who speaks against another, thus judging him, said to speak evil of the law?
 - e. Why can a person not be a doer of the law and a judge of it at the same time?
16. Rather than speak against someone, what are we advised to do? See Matthew 18:15-18 and Galatians 6:1-2.

17. By whom would you rather be judged, another person or Jesus Christ and why?

DAY SIX: Read James 4:13-17.

18. a. In James 4:13-16, how does planning for tomorrow differ from boasting of tomorrow?
- b. What does the Lord Jesus say about boasting in Matthew 5:34-37?
- c. How much of your thoughts and conversation center around what you will do tomorrow?
- d. Does this fit the definition of "boasting" above? Why or why not?
- e. What are we advised to say in 4:15?
19. a. What do you think it is about tomorrow that most concerns people?
- b. How would you apply Jesus' words in Matthew 6:25-34 to your concerns for tomorrow?
20. Since people seem to either worry or boast about tomorrow, how would 4:14 help them focus on today?
21. a. How does James' conclusion in 4:17 apply to our vapor-like life and our lack of power over tomorrow?
- b. What is the "good" (verse 17) we know to do today with our life?