

# THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

## *“Book of Faith, or Epistle of Straw?”*

### JAMES – Chapter Three

#### BIBLE STUDY PRESENTATION @ SESSION #5

(In this and subsequent study sessions, three translations of the Holy Bible are used; they are identified as THE AMPLIFIED BIBLE [AMP], THE MESSAGE [MSG], and THE NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION [NRSV].)

#### A GENERAL INTRODUCTION to this chapter/session –

James begins chapter 3 with a caution against many of his readers becoming teachers. In view of the stricter judgment that awaits teachers, one should be sure they possess the maturity and self-control necessary to control the tongue. James then provides a series of illustrations to demonstrate the power and danger of the tongue, and how we can easily be inconsistent in our use of it (Vss. 1-12).

Perhaps some sought to be teachers so as to appear wise. Yet James writes that wisdom and understanding are to be shown by one’s conduct, done in meekness. He then defines and contrasts the difference between two kinds of wisdom. There is wisdom which is earthly that causes confusion and every evil thing. On the other hand, there is wisdom which is heavenly that produces the peaceable fruit of righteousness (Vss. 13-18).

Before entering directly on a textual study of James 3, it is important to pause and consider the importance of teachers, and the honor rendered to them, in the early church. For example, in the church centered at Antioch, teachers are ranked with the prophets who sent Paul and Barnabas out on their first missionary journey (see Acts 13:1). In St. Paul’s list of those who hold great gifts within the Church, teachers come behind the apostles and the prophets (see 1 Cor. 12:28). In the Letter to the Ephesians they were ranked equal to pastors (see Eph. 4:11). The reality was that apostles and prophets were constantly moving from place to place and did not remain long with any one congregation. Teachers, on the other hand, worked long-term within a given congregation, and to them was given responsibility for instructing new converts in a proper understanding of the Christian faith and the message of the Gospel.

In the N.T. there are several reports of teachers who failed in their responsibilities. **(1)** There were those who attempted to turn Christianity into another kind of Judaism by trying to introduce the practice of circumcision and a strict keeping of the law (see Acts 15:24). **(2)** Then there were those whose personal lives were in contradiction to the faith they taught (see Romans 2:17-29). **(3)** Some tried to teach before they themselves really knew anything (1Tim. 1:6-7). **(4)** Finally, there were false teachers who acceded to the deceitful desires of the crowd (2 Tim. 4:3).

The Christian teacher really took the place of the Rabbi in Judaism. There were many great Rabbis; but, many of them were treated in a way that could possibly ruin one’s character. The

word “**Rabbi**” literally means “**My Great One.**” Everywhere a Rabbi went, he was accorded utmost respect. Judaism taught that a man’s duty to his Rabbi exceeded his duty to his parents; this because his parents only brought him into the life of this world, but his teacher brought him into the life of the world to come! In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus speaks negatively about some rabbis who seem to have “*gloried*” in the almost subservient respect shown to them in public (MT 23:4-7). It seems that no profession other than teaching is more liable to falsely engender spiritual and intellectual pride.

It was James’ conviction that teaching is a very dangerous occupation. The teacher’s primary mechanism of instruction is speech; and, the tool most often employed is the tongue. Therefore, teachers must struggle to avoid two pitfalls: (1) a teacher needs to know that he/she is teaching the truth, and not his/her own opinions and prejudices; it is fatally easy to distort God’s truth. (2) A teacher must be careful that he/she does not contradict what is being taught by the way that teacher lives his/her own life. A good teacher must never be in a position where students cannot hear what is said because of “*listening*” and observing to what that teacher is!

## **A) TRUE RELIGION CONTROLS THE TONGUE (JAMES 3:1-12)**

### **... FIRST, A CAUTION AGAINST BECOMING TEACHERS (1-2)**

[AMP] “**Not many** [of you] **should become teachers** (self-constituted censors and reprovers of others), **my brethren, for you know that we** [teachers] **will be judged by a higher standard and with grater severity** [than other people; thus we assume the greater accountability and the more condemnation]. **For we all often stumble and fall and offend in many things. And if anyone does not offend in speech** [never says the wrong things], **he is a fully developed character and a perfect man, able to control his whole body and to curb his entire nature.**”

[MSG] “Don’t be in any rush to become a teacher, my friends. Teaching is highly responsible work. Teachers are held to the strictest standards. And none of us is perfectly qualified. We get it wrong nearly every time we open our mouths. If you could find someone whose speech was perfectly true, you’d have a perfect person, in perfect control of life.”

### **Facilitator’s Comments:**

James sets forth two ideas that were intertwined in Jewish thought and culture:

- a) There is no one in this world who does not sin in something; this universality of sin runs through the Bible;
  - Romans 3:10, 23 – Paul says, “**we all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**”

- 1 John 1:8 – John says, ***“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”***
  - Ecclesiastes 7:20 – The preacher declares, ***“There is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.”***
  - Even pagan writers have expressed the same conviction about sin.
- b) There is no sin to which we more easily succumb, but which has the gravest of consequences, than the sin of the tongue.
- Jesus warned ***“By your words you will be justified; and by your words you will be condemned”*** (Matthew 12:36-37).
  - In more ancient times these words were penned: ***“A soft answer turns away wrath; but a harsh word stirs up anger . . . A gentle tongue is a tree of life; but perverseness in it breaks the spirit”*** (Proverbs 15:1-4).

### **A BREAK for DISCUSSION:**

In this passage, James includes himself as a teacher; he states that teachers will be judged more strictly. Why should teachers be judged more severely than others? Does a reading of Mark 12:38–40 give any further insights?

*(Continuing further under point “A” ... TRUE RELIGION CONTROLS THE TONGUE)*

#### **.... THE POWER OF THE TONGUE (3-4)**

[AMP] ***“<sup>3</sup>If we set bits in the horses’ mouths to make them obey us, we can turn their whole bodies about. <sup>4</sup>Likewise, look at the ships: though they are so great and are driven by rough winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the impulse of the helmsman determines.”***

[MSG] ***“A bit in the mouth of a horse controls the whole horse. A small rudder on a huge ship in the hands of a skilled captain sets a course in the face of the strongest winds.”***

#### **Facilitator’s Comments:**

- A) Two highly descriptive word pictures are used here by James:
- a horse’s bit
  - a ship’s rudder
- b) This is not – for a moment – an appeal to total silence; not like living in some monasteries and/or convents where speech is absolutely forbidden
- c) It is not an appeal for cowardly silence; but ...
- d) It is a genuine appeal for control of the tongue!

(Continuing further under point "A" ... TRUE RELIGION CONTROLS THE TONGUE)

... **THE DANGER OF THE TONGUE** (5-6)

[AMP] ***"Even so the tongue is a little member, and it can boast of great things. See how much wood or how great a forest a tiny spark can set ablaze! <sup>6</sup> And the tongue is a fire. [The tongue is a] world of wickedness set among our members, contaminating and depraving the whole body and setting on fire the wheel of birth (the cycle of man's nature), being itself ignited by hell (Gehenna)."***

[MSG] ***"A word out of your mouth may seem of no account, but it can accomplish nearly anything – or destroy it! It only takes a spark, remember, to set off a forest fire. A careless or wrongly placed word out of your mouth can do that. By our speech we can ruin the world, turn harmony to chaos, throw mud on a reputation, send the whole world up in smoke and go up in smoke with it, smoke right from the pit of hell."***

**Facilitator's Comments:**

1. The danger inherent in the tongue is like the danger of possessed by a forest fire. In Palestine, where there is typically a dry season, the Jews knew very well how quickly flames can spread and how fire can get out of control. The picture of a forest fire is common in the Bible:
  - Psalm 83:13-14 - The Psalmist prays that God may make the wicked like chaff before the wind; and that his tempest may destroy them like as fire consumes the forest, and the flame sets the mountains ablaze.
  - Isaiah 9:18 – The prophet speaks of how ***"wickedness burned like a fire, consuming briars and thorns; it kindled the thickets of the forest, and they swirled upward in a column of smoke."***
  - Zechariah 12:6 – Zechariah speaks of ***"a blazing pot in the midst of wood, like a flaming torch among sheaves."***
2. The picture of the tongue, as a fire, is also a common Jewish portrayal – Proverbs 16:27 – ***"Scoundrels concoct evil, and their speech is like a scorching fire."***
3. There are some important reasons why the damage which the tongue can do is like a fire:
  - It is wide-ranging – the tongue can damage at a considerable distance
  - It is uncontrollable, once words have been spoken they cannot be taken back

4. An uncontrolled tongue, says James, is like a world hostile to God; it is that part of the body which most frequently disobeys him.
5. In biblical times the depiction of the wheel was often used to describe the cycle of life. Here the inference is that the wheel, a circle, represents a complete whole; the wheel of life is the totality of life
6. Others, however, have provided some interesting and differing philosophical interpretations:
  - Any point in the wheel is always moving up or down; thus, the wheel can also stand for “the ups and downs” of life
  - The wheel is circular; it is always turning back upon itself in exactly the same circle; so, the wheel sometimes came to be depicted for the cyclical repetition of life: the weary round of an existence which is always repeating itself, never advancing!
  - The Orphic religion believed that the human soul was continually undergoing a process of birth and death and rebirth; and the aim of life was to escape from this treadmill into infinite being. So the Orphic devotee who had reached that point could say: *“I have flown out of the sorrowful, weary wheel.”* We have no indications that James knew anything about Orphic reincarnation.

### A BREAK for DISCUSSION:

We all have spoken regrettable words in the context of our family, business, professional, and social lives, which, in retrospect, we would like to forever erase. The examples provided in James 3 are not of that nature. What, then, is the context of James’ writings on the tongue or verbal communications in the early church?

*(Continuing still further under point “A” ... TRUE RELIGION CONTROLS THE TONGUE)*

#### ... THE DIFFICULTY OF TAMING THE TONGUE (7-12)

[AMP] ***“For every kind of beast and bird, or reptile and sea animal, can be tamed and has been tamed by human genius (nature).<sup>8</sup> But the human tongue can be tamed by no man. It is a restless (undisciplined, irreconcilable) evil, full of deadly poison.<sup>9</sup> With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men who were made in God’s likeness!<sup>10</sup> Out of the same mouth come forth blessing and cursing.***

***These things, my brethren, ought not to be so. <sup>11</sup> Does a fountain send forth [simultaneously] from the same opening fresh water and bitter? <sup>12</sup> Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine figs? Neither can a salt spring furnish fresh water.***

[MSG] ***“This is scary: You can tame a tiger, but you can’t tame a tongue – it’s never been done. The tongue runs wild, a wanton killer. With our tongues we bless God our Father; with the same tongues we curse the very man and women he made in his image. Curses and blessings out of the same mouth! My friends, this can’t go on. A spring doesn’t gush fresh water one day and brackish the next, does it? Apple trees don’t bear strawberries, do they? Raspberry bushes don’t bear apples, do they? You are not going to dip into a polluted mud hole and get a cup of clear, cool water, are you?”***

### **Facilitator’s Comments:**

1. From experience, we know of the inevitable divisions in human nature:
  - In humans there is always something of the “ape” and the “angel”
  - Something of the “hero” and the “villain”
  - Something of the “saint” and the “sinner”It is James’ deep conviction that nowhere is this contradiction more evident than in the use of the tongue!
2. Humans can control creatures of land and sea, but not the tongue; it is unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we both bless and curse.
3. This would have been especially relevant to anyone with a Jewish background:
  - Whenever the name of God is employed, a pious Jew must still respond *“Blessed be He!”*
  - 3 times daily, devout Jews had to repeat the SHEMONEH ESREH, 18 prayers all called EULOGIES, every one of which begins: *“Blessed be thou, O God.”*
  - Yet, James found that the very same mouths which so frequently and piously blessed God, also gushed forth with curses of fellowmen
  - James pronounced this to be totally unnatural and wrong
4. Even Jesus’ disciples succumbed to the evils in properly using the tongue:
  - Matthew 26:35 – records **Peter** as saying *“Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you”*; yet that very same tongue of Peter, went on to deny Jesus, using oaths and curses (see MT 26:60-75).

- The disciple/apostle, **John**, who declared, “*Little children, love one another,*” was the same man who had once wished to call down fire from heaven to destroy a whole Samaritan village (see LK 9:51-56).

### A BREAK for DISCUSSION:

- 1) Examine your own life. Could you make a list of the top ten regrettable things you've said to other people? Why was it regrettable? Why do we say these things?
- 2) What can we do to avoid future regrets and control our tongues? Look at the following scriptural verses; what advice do they offer:

Romans 12:2-3

Proverbs 13:3

Proverbs 20:19

Ecclesiastes 3:7

## +MOVING ON TO A NEW THOUGHT IN JAMES' WRITING+

### **B) TRUE RELIGION DISPLAYS GODLY WISDOM (James 3:13-18)**

... IT IS SEEN IN ONE'S CONDUCT (vs. 13)

[AMP] ***“Who is there among you who is wise and intelligent? Then let him by his noble living show forth his [good] works with the [unobtrusive] humility [which is the proper attribute] of true wisdom.”***

[MSG] ***“Do you want to be counted wise, to build a reputation for wisdom? Here's what you do: Live well, live wisely, live humbly.”***

#### Facilitator's Comments:

1. James, here, returns to the thoughts expressed at the beginning of this chapter. His argument is that if there is anyone who wishes to be a real teacher, then let that person live a life of such graciousness toward others, that it will be proven that gentleness is the controlling power of that teacher's life.
2. It is supremely difficult for one who teaches to remain humble
3. Any teacher (*preacher, too, for that matter*) is under a double temptation:
  - An enticement to be arrogant
  - An enticement to bitterness

(Continuing with point B: *TRUE RELIGION DISPLAYS GODLY WISDOM*)

... by comparing it to THE DISPLAY OF EARTHLY WISDOM (vss. 14-16)

[AMP] ***“But if you have bitter jealousy (envy) and contention (rivalry, selfish ambition) in your hearts, do not pride yourselves on it and thus be in defiance of and false to the Truth. <sup>15</sup>This [superficial] wisdom is not such as comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual (animal), even devilish (demonical). <sup>16</sup>For wherever there is jealousy (envy) and contention (rivalry and selfish ambition), there will also be confusion (unrest, disharmony, rebellion) and all sorts of evil and vile practices.”***

[MSG] ***“It's the way you live, not the way you talk, that counts. Mean-spirited ambition isn't wisdom. Boasting that you are wise isn't wisdom. Twisting the truth to make yourselves sound wise isn't wisdom. It's the furthest thing from wisdom – it's animal***

**cunning, devilish conniving. Whenever you're trying to look better than others or get the better of others, things fall apart and everyone ends up at the other's throats."**

**Facilitator's Comments:**

1. One of the most difficult things in life is to argue without passion; to counter arguments without wounding others; to be utterly convinced of one's own beliefs without at the same time being bitter to those who hold opposing views.
2. Interestingly, four characteristics of the wrong kind of teaching are found in this passage:
  - a) Teaching that is FANATICAL. The truth it holds is held with unbalanced violence, rather than with reasoned conviction.
  - b) Teaching that is BITTER with envy. It regards its opponents as enemies to be wiped out, rather than as friends to be persuaded.
  - c) Teaching that is SELFISHLY AMBITIOUS. It is in the final analysis, more eager to display itself – to celebrate the victory of its own opinion – rather than to display the truth.
  - d) Teaching that is ARROGANT. Taking an attitude of pride in its own knowledge rather than humility in its ignorance.
3. James then moves on to describe this arrogant and bitter wisdom in terms of its effects:
  - a) It is earthly, sensual, demonic
  - b) It is characteristic of the 'natural' man
  - c) It issues in disorder and produces confusion
    - Instead of bring people together, it drives them apart
    - Instead of producing peace it causes strife
    - Its effect, in any group, is to cause trouble!

*(Continuing on with point B: TRUE RELIGION DISPLAYS GODLY WISDOM)*

**... THIS IS THE TRUE DISPLAY OF HEAVENLY WISDOM (vss. 17-18)**

[AMP] ***"But the wisdom from above is first of all pure* (undefiled); *then it is peace-loving, courteous* (considerate, gentle). [It is willing to] *yield to reason, full of compassion and good fruits; it is wholehearted and straightforward, impartial and unfeigned* (free from doubts, wavering, and insincerity). <sup>18</sup>*And the harvest of righteousness* (of conformity to God's Will in thought and deed) *is* [the fruit of the seed] *sown in peace by those who work for and make peace* [in themselves and in others, that peace which means concord, agreement, and harmony between individuals, with undisturbedness, in a peaceful mind free from fears and agitating passions and moral conflicts]."**

[MSG] **“Real wisdom, God’s wisdom, begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others. It is gentle and reasonable, overflowing with mercy and blessings, not hot one day and cold the next, not two-faced. You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoy its results only if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honor.”**

### Facilitator’s Comments:

James uses **8 words to describe real wisdom**; depending on the specific biblical version used, they have been translated with slight differences into English; herewith, those words:

1. **Wisdom is pure.** (in Greek: **HAGNOS**). Pure enough to approach the gods!
2. **Wisdom that is peaceable.** (in Greek: **EIRENIKOS**) ‘Eirene’ means “*peace*” and when used of humans, its basic meaning is right relationships between persons; and, right relationships between humans and God.
3. **Wisdom is EPIEIKES** (a Gk. word that is almost impossible to translate). Aristotle defined it as “*that which is just beyond the written law,*” and as “*justice and better than justice*” and as “*that which steps in to correct things when the law itself becomes unjust.*”
4. **Wisdom is easy to persuade** (in Greek: **EUPEITHES**). Not in the sense of being weak and pliable, but in the sense of not being stubborn and rigid; of being willing to listen, to reason, and to appeal.
5. **Wisdom is full of mercy** (in Greek: **ELEOS**) Greeks defined it as *pity for the man who is suffering unjustly*. In Christian thought it means mercy for the person who is in trouble, even if the trouble is self-caused. Christian pity is a reflection of God’s pity.
6. **Wisdom issues itself in Good Fruits** (in Greek *again*: **ELEOS**). Here, the same Greek word, used above, also carries with it the understanding of providing practical help. Christian pity is not just an emotion; it is an action. We can never say that we have truly pitied any person until we have helped that person!
7. **Wisdom is impartial** (in Greek: **ADIKRITOS**) really meaning ‘*undivided*’. Wisdom knows its own mind; chooses its course; “*sticks with it.*” In biblical times (*today, too!*) there were those who spoke about having an “*open mind*” and about suspending judgment. But, Christian wisdom is based on the certainty of God which we receive through faith in Jesus Christ.

8. **Wisdom is without Hypocrisy** (in Greek: ANUPOKRITOS). True wisdom is honest; it does not deal in deception; it does not pretend to be what it is not; it never acts a part to gain its own ends.

### **FINAL BREAK for DISCUSSION:**

1. What are the great things we can do to please God with our mouths and with our tongues or speech?
2. What might be the results in our contemporary society of implementing the Godly wisdom that is spoken of at the conclusion of James' chapter 3?