

James 3

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[0 : 0 0] say. Amen. Now as we turn to this third chapter in the letter of James we have the main subject matter here is of the concern of the control of the tongue but this is not if you like a separate subject from what he's been talking about in chapter 2 or indeed in chapter 1 often mentioned in the past how in the original scriptures when they're written in the Greek and in the Hebrew with the possible exception of the book of Psalms there wasn't any chapter divisions or verse divisions. That only came hundreds of years later. So what James is writing here is really one subject unfolding as he works through the book and like if you think of the colours of a rainbow, if you see a clear rainbow on a particular day and it's very vivid you can tell and distinguish the different colours but if someone were to say to you, tell me exactly where the red stops and the orange begins. You know when we have children's pictures there's a clear demarcation line between the different colours in the rainbow. In real life we know that isn't the case. You look at the arc of a rainbow and you see them sort of blending into each other you can distinguish each colour but you couldn't say where one definitely stopped and another definitely started. So we have had in chapter 1, James talking about seeking the wisdom of the Lord and about being doers of the word and not hearers only. In other words, your faith which has to be true and not wavering like the waves of the sea has to be put into practice.

And that's the theme in chapter 2 that faith on its own is dead unless it is put into practice. And he is continuing on this theme of putting faith into practice here in chapter 3.

But it's more concerned now with reigning in the expression of evil and the controlling of the self and particularly the tongue rather than acting out of good deeds as such.

And the particular danger that he opens with in verse 1 here is the danger of seeking too quickly or too enthusiastically or readily to take on the position of a teacher or master as it says here.

Be not many masters. Now, I'm a great lover of the authorised version but in this particular instance these opening verses are not ideal in the way that the authorised version translates it.

[2 : 3 1] It sounds like be not many masters, don't be lots of different masters or don't have control over many servants or don't seek to be a lot of different things at once. Really what it's referring to is as different versions have it.

If you've got a New King James in front of you there as some of you may it says, my brethren, let not many of you become teachers knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.

That's what it means as the greater condemnation in the same way as in the communion in 1 Corinthians 11 it says, he that eateth and drinketh unworthily eateth and drinketh damnation to himself.

And the more accurate way of translating that word is judgment. So we will be judged more strictly. We receive a stricter judgment. We all stumble in many things.

If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man. He will also be bride of a whole body.

Likewise, the New International Version, some of you may know, not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

[3 : 3 4] We will be judged with greater strictness, says the English Standard Version. The Good News Bible, my friends, not many of you should become teachers. As you know, we teachers will be judged with greater strictness than others.

Or if you're really at the trendy modern versions of the message, 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 this is really what it means. It says masters, it means in the sense of school masters, which used to be the old-fashioned term for one who taught, just as in Galatians. You know, the law was

our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ.

And part of the danger is, as James is pointing out, that to begin with in the New Testament church, the idea that faith is all you need. If you've got faith, then you've got gifts. And everybody's got gifts, then everybody can chip in with a wee bit of teaching here, or a wee bit of inspiration there, and everybody just puts in their tuppence worth.

And this is great as far as it goes, but this is part of the problem that Paul was writing to the Corinthians about. If everybody just throws in their tuppence worth, here, there, and everywhere, then eventually it comes to be abused.

[4 : 45] And people start thinking, well, I haven't said anything for a wee while, so I'll just pop up and say, oh, the Spirit's telling me to say this, or God's telling me to say that. Well, maybe God hasn't.

So, it's very easy for it to become abused. And that is the case as well, even if you are one whose task is to teach the word, because we will be judged the more strictly.

And notice that James includes himself in this. We shall receive the stricter judgment, the greater condemnation. We stand to be more strictly judged.

Because, as he says in chapter 4, verse 12, there's one lawgiver who is able to save and to destroy. Who art thou that judgest another? Don't go saying, oh, he hasn't got as good gifts as me. I'm better than him.

God is the one to whom we answer. And, you know, we will all be held to the standard to an extent. All Christians are in the situation of being those who will be required to live according to what they profess to believe.

[5 : 47] You know, how many people look around at Christians and say, well, he or she doesn't seem to be living much according to their faith. Now, in some cases they are, and it's just that it's the world's idea that, oh, they should be more tolerant, they should be more easygoing, rather than strict in their standards.

But if that is the case for Christians that we should be held to account for what we profess to believe, how much more is it for those who teach? Just as, you know, you wouldn't have much confidence in, say, an economist or a financial advisor whose own finances were in a mess. You wouldn't really want to go and place your future in the hands of a marriage guidance counselor who was on his or her third divorce. You wouldn't want to place much confidence in somebody who was a car mechanic and their own car was always broken down.

You know, and as somebody once said, partly tongue-in-cheek, why do people in health food shops always look so unhealthy? You know, we've got to be able to be seen, to be judged by the standards that we profess.

And that which we seek to teach will be applied the most strictly to ourselves. We shall receive the greater condemnation. It's a responsible, serious thing.

[7 : 02] And the Lord Jesus will likewise hold people to account. In Luke chapter 12, for example, when he talks about stewards, he says, who then is a faithful and wise steward?

That doesn't just mean a servant. That means the one who was over the whole household. You know, the ancient kings of Scotland were the royal house of steward. And steward is just a different form of the word steward.

They were those who had charge of the kingdom on behalf initially of others. And then they became kings themselves. So the steward is the one who's in charge of everybody else.

So who then is a wise steward? This is what the Lord is asking. Who gives the rest of the servants their food, their meat in due time and who looks after them?

You know, who's going to be the one who will be trusted in that way? Blessed is that servant whom his Lord when he cometh shall find so doing. Of a truth I say I do, will make him rule over all that he hath.

[8 : 02] But if that servant say in his heart, my Lord delayeth his coming and shall begin to beat the men servants and ladens and to eat and drink and to be drunken, the Lord of that servant will come in a day when he looketh not for him and at an hour when he is not aware and will cut him in sunder and will appoint him his portion with the unbelievers.

It is a solemn responsibility to be teaching others the things of God. It's not just oh God told me to say this or I've got a word from the Lord or a vision from the Lord.

No. What saith the scriptures? What does God's own words say? In many things we offend all. That doesn't mean we upset everybody. It's rather we offend, we stumble, we slip, all of us.

It's the same sense in which in Matthew's account of the gospel when it's the last supper and Jesus says in Matthew 26 verse 27 he gave him the cup, gave thanks, gave it to him saying drink ye all of it.

It doesn't mean drink down every last drop. He means drink you all of it or all of you drink of it and that's the sense here. In many things we offend all. We offend, we slip, we stumble, all of us.

[9 : 16] If any man doesn't slip or stumble or cause offence in word the same is a perfect man. Does it mean sinless? Does it mean he never puts a foot wrong?

But rather it means he is able if he can control the tongue he can control the rest of the body as well. Because you know if we were to say well what's the most difficult sin to avoid?

Well it's the sins in the thoughts in the mind, the heart. You know it's very hard to stop evil things popping into your head. It's hard, again, it's a little easier to stop yourself from speaking bad things because you can to an extent decide what you're going to say or not say and again it's more straightforward to stop yourself physically doing bad things.

You can reign in the body, that's one thing. You can stop yourself from actually doing something that you know is a sin. It may be harder to stop yourself speaking something which is simple but hardest of all is to stop what's in the mind and the heart.

But if you can control the tongue and you can certainly control the rest of the body he's able to bridle the whole body. When it says a perfect man it means a man fit for purpose.

[10 : 30] One who is able to do the task. This is the sense in which James has been using the word perfect throughout. It doesn't mean spotless, sinless, unblemished. It means the right tool for the right job.

It means fit for purpose. It means able to apply to the thing that needs to be done. The same is a perfect man. Yes, he's right. He's capable of being a teacher.

Able also to bridle of the whole body. Behold, we put bits in the horse's mouths that they may obey us and we turn about their whole body. Behold, also the ships which though they be so great are driven of fierce winds yet they turn about with a very small help.

Now the rudder may be quite a big thing but in proportion to the rest of the ship it's tiny compared to the rest. Whosoever the governor must have, whatsoever he desires, whichever way the pilot or the captain decides the ship is going to turn, that's the way it goes.

And just in accordance to his desire or his plan or the decision where he's going to take it to the ship, it's his thought, his desire, even so, by the same desire by the same token, the tongue being a little member boasts great things.

[11 : 45] How great a matter. Now when it says matter that implies, you know, material for burning. Some modern translations translate this verse by the, how great a forest, potential burning material, a little fire kindles, you know, how many forest fires whether in Australia or other places or get started by somebody, you know, a campfire that wasn't put out properly, just smouldering away there, or else a cigarette end or something like that.

Over the course of the communions, I was mentioning to one of the visiting ministers how in the house we used to stay had been emptying out ashes into a cardboard box, good stiff, solid cardboard box, and I thought, they feel a wee bit warm actually, you know, feel a wee bit warm, so I better not put them inside the house, put them outside on the concrete path, away from the house and just let them cool down, but all the time the ashes inside and the cardboard box all closed in, it was warm and I would go out and test it, and it was still a bit warm, but it was obviously building up its heat because one time when I opened the door and looked at it and it was bursting to flames, completely consuming the whole thing.

Now if I had been left inside the house, it could have done a whole lot of damage, but it's just a case of how even the ash which when you were putting it into the box, it wasn't glowing orange or red or anything like that, it wasn't flaming away, it was just the heat in it, and it doesn't take much just to build up, you know, a cigarette end from some of the forest or a campfire that's not put out or ash that's bought, so likewise, a little word, a little thing that is done can bring down so much.

Some of you may remember, if you're of a certain age, John Major was a prime minister and towards the last few years of his government, the government of the day introduced a policy which was described as back to basics, and initially the impetus was that this was going to be back to family values and sort of decent old-fashioned morality, and a lot of people thought, great, this is

going to be good at last, we'll recover some sort of decency in the country again, and then of course it was discovered that the same prime minister and various other members of his cabinet had been having affairs with members of the opposite sex in their cabinet or with secretaries or whatever, one after another of those cabinet were exposed as being people, not because, oh how terrible they felt, they sinned in that respect, the difficulty wasn't that they had skeletons in their cupboards or mistresses in their beds or whatever, the difficulty was that here they were trumpeting a policy of saying back to their sex family values and so on, and here they were themselves, more guilty than anybody else, and that was what added to the problems that that government had, because there was an inconsistency, a fire that was kindled by what was being said on the one hand and the contrast with what was being done, now how many of us of course know that we may have either taken offence or given offence, hurt somebody else by things that we either didn't even know or we didn't mean, you know, even if you bring this into a microcosm situation, a family argument, let's say, you know, stressful times, family get together, somebody says something, somebody else takes it the wrong way, and how many of us have felt hurt or offence or whatever because of a throwaway remark that somebody said, and they didn't even know that they had hurt us with it, it's just why we have to be so careful with what is said and what is done, and also how it is said, behold how great a matter, a little fire came with, the tongue is a fire, a world where it says a world, he hath the force of nature of iniquity, so is the tongue among our members, he defiles the whole body, when somebody says or speaks that which is wrong or which is untrue, then it gives the whole person a reputation for untruthfulness, unreliability, black mark, unreliable character, and so on, it taints the whole person, it might even taint other members of their family, you think, well, he must have known about it, he must have, she must know what her husband is like, or vice versa, you know, so the whole family, other people can be tainted because of the untruths one person speaks, or inconsistencies one person speaks, and it's a whole body that is set on fire, the course of nature is set on fire of hell, because untruth and hurtful words, or unadvised speech, where does this come from, it doesn't come ultimately from the Lord,

Proverbs 16 tells us, verse 27, an ungodly man diggeth up evil, and in his lips there is as a burning fire, now the Lord tells us, of course, that the way he has designed the body, it's been said by some commentators, that the tongue is held in behind the double edge, or the double barrier of the teeth and the lips, and yet still it breaks out, still it breaks out and can cause harm or damage so easily, every kind of beasts and birds and serpents and things in the sea is tamed, half been tamed of mankind, but the tongue can no man tame, it is an unruly evil, now the Greek that's translated as unruly, it means restless, it means irresponsible, and incapable of being restrained, incapable of restraint, in that sense, full of deadly poison, now this would be one reason why in the middle ages some kind of sect of monks and so on just bowed complete silence, you know, rather than say a wrong word, just don't say anything, but you know, that's not really the answer either because we have been given tongues with which to praise God, you know, it says a little further down, there we curse we men, and there with bliss we God, even the Father, you know, we are meant to praise God with our tongues, we're meant to speak his praises, sing his praises, we're meant to pray on occasion out loud, we're meant to use our voices and our tongues for good, for blessing, for encouragement, for kindness, and you know, a kind word can do a lot of good, and a kind encouragement can build somebody up, and the right words can move people to do great things, and yet at the same time, wrongly used, can do great damage, you know, time and time again reports come through about Christians who have been, you know, their homes have been attacked, or burned, or churches have been burned down, why it often happens on a

[18:47] Friday, for example, because a mob has been whipped up in a mosque by something that the imam or whatever said in the Friday sermon or so-called prayers, he would tell them all how bad the Christians were, and they've got a, they've got to honor their Allah, and they go and destroy the Christian quarter, or attack Christian businesses or homes, because they've been whipped up through a frenzy by the words that somebody has spoken, and it is perfectly possible to do great harm with wrong words, and it's perfectly possible to do a lot of good with the right words.

The answer is not silence, but part of the answer is restraint, just like with so many other sins, it's in one sense, just ban it all together, if something's a problem, just ban it all together, but most of these things are things which God has given us to use well, and to use rightly, and to use for blessing, and just because the devil will always take and twist and abuse whatever God gives, you know, God gives art, and the devil twists it into pornography, God gives beauty, and the devil twists

it into lust, God gives, you know, the benefits of, you know, occasional use of, say, strong drink to gladden the heart of man, as Psalm 104 says, and the devil turns it into drunkenness and addiction, so the devil will always take what God gives that is good and turn it into something evil, you know, even the first temptation in the garden there, when the serpent is testing Adam and Eve, oh, you shall not die,

God knows, that in the day that you eat thereof you will be as gods, knowing good and evil, and that was true, they would, but it was an attempt to turn, to twist things around, to nowadays you would say spin, to spin the truth into something which it wasn't originally intended for, the tongue can no maintain, it is an unruly, evil, restless, incapable of respect, therewith bless we God, as we ought to, even the Father, and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God, made in God's image, and at the same mouth proceeded blessing and cursing, my brethren, these things ought not so to be.

a lot of the harm that we do, or the words that we speak which may be bad or harmful, it's because we think we'll get away with it, don't we, you know, road rage, for example, you know, people will shout out all sorts of things whilst they're behind a wheel and safely enclosed in their car, but let's say somebody sees what you're doing or hears what you're saying and they stop the car and they get out and they come over to your car, well suddenly it's a different story now, isn't it?

And likewise, you know, anonymity in cyber, cyberspace in with the internet, you know, the amount of internet trolls because people can hide behind anonymity, a hashtag and a fake picture or a false name.

[22 : 02] Now in the former day when you could only express yourself by writing into the newspaper with your name and full address and your words would be published and your name underneath and your address, everybody knew what you'd say, you had to be prepared to stand by your words and answer for them if need be when somebody else wrote them the next week opposing what you would say.

But if you're just writing a whole bunch of filth on the internet and put a false name, nobody has to answer for it. Anonymity can trash people's reputations without having necessarily to answer themselves, but of course this isn't how Jesus sees it at all.

Jesus says to the scribes and the Pharisees, he says, O generation of vipers, how can ye being evil speak good things? Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.

So in other words, what comes out of our mouths is a reflection of what is in our hearts. A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things.

But I say unto you that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account them of in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.

[23 : 21] The tongue which has to be restrained, not silenced altogether, but held in check. This phrase, you know, bite your tongue, you could do an awful lot worse than bite your tongue when you're tempted to speak out something that you might later on have cause to regret.

Even when we feel that right is on our side, even when we feel that we're entitled to have a good old blast, circumstances can change so quickly.

I remember again some years ago somebody was writing an article about and this was before the tragic death of Princess Diana, saying her lifestyle wasn't exactly drawing favour to herself.

Here she was on this holiday with Dodi Fayed and so on, concerned about the effect it might be having on her young children and so on, and all of which was true and people were used to having these things written about Princess Diana and then suddenly she was killed in a car truck and overnight transformed into the status or effectively a saint in many people's eyes.

and any newspaper article that had been written prior to that night and published the next day was going to look absolutely terrible.

[24 : 44] It may have been all true the time was written but 24 hours later it all looked very very different. You just never know what is going to be around the corner and how the words that you have blasted out that may have seemed right and true and justified are suddenly turned around by circumstances.

But come therewith bless me God even the father therewith curse we men which are made up in the similitude of God out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing my brethren these things ought not so to be that the fountain sent forth the same place sweet water and bitter or the fig tree

my brethren be olive berries or vine figs so no fountain yield both salt water and fresh it can't do both and if it seems to do both if it seems to be able to reuse sweet water and bitter then something is fake because it can't be doing both so one or other must be not the truth either it's genuinely a sweet water fountain and somebody's mixing in salt to make it bitter at some places or it's genuinely salt water and somebody's adding in fake water to make it taste sweet it can't be both it must be one or the other who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you let him show out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom now conversation here ironically doesn't mean simply speech it means your walk your lifestyle his works with meekness of wisdom exactly a continuation of what we had in chapter 2 likewise see chapter 2 there verse 18 a man may say thou hast faith and I have works show me thy faith without thy works and I will show thee my faith by my works who thinks they've got wisdom if any man have wisdom let him ask of God chapter 1 verse 5 but let him ask in faith nothing wavering ask for the truth what is the beginning of wisdom the feet of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom if any man seems to be endued with knowledge a wise man let him show how wise he is let him put his faith into practice again continuation of all that James has been saying before but if you're bitter envying and strife in your heart why would you envy what somebody else has you envy it because I want what he's got

I want his gifts or I want his popularity or I want his power or I want his wealth or I want his wife or I want his car whatever the case may be envying and strife in your hearts don't be puffed up in glory because you're lying against the truth you're saying oh I've been changed by grace but I still want his job I still want his house I still want his car I still want his popularity I still want his reputation I want what God has given him so where there is this envying and strife we cannot at the same time be uniquely submitting to the Lord and serving him in our respective trials this wisdom and it may seem wise to the world because that's what the world does isn't it the world says oh no you've just got to be self-asserted you've just got to put yourself forward you've got to sell yourself in interviews you know it's not enough now for the youngsters to be able to have straight A's in their exams to get into university no they all want a personal statement in other words sell yourself to this university convince us why we should have you instead of him or her sell yourself in your personal statement they all have to push themselves they all have to self-assert say why I'm the best person for the job and we have to push push push this self-assertiveness self-direction

I can be whatever I want to be no you can't actually nowadays of course I can be whatever gender I want to be no you can't nor can you just do whatever you want to do if you try hard enough some people don't have the gifts or the abilities or the skills in all of my life I will never be able as a boy would have broken my heart to be told this I will never not play for Scotland in the world cup oh dear how sad there would have been a time I would have delighted to do that but I don't ever do that gifts like that have been given to other people the Lord has called me to different things other things if you have bitter envy and strife in your hearts glory not and lie not against the truth this wisdom this wisdom that the world says is so positive and so self-oriented this is what you're going to go for it doesn't descend from above it doesn't come from the Lord but it is earthly it's earthbound sensual animalistic devilish it's not coming from

God so where is it coming from chapter 1 verse 17 remember every good gift and every perfect gift is from above and cometh down from the father of lights with whom there is no variable this now there shall turn this wisdom descended not from above but is earthly sensual devilish it is of this fallen world and the fallen angel the devil and of the appealing to the worst animal spirits in us for where ending and strife is there is confusion and the word translated confusion it's more accurately tumultuous anarchy there's no kind of restraint no kind of bonds no kind of order at all and every evil work but the wisdom that is from above is first pure in a sense of chaste purity then peaceable gentle easy to be intrigued now you know again when people talk about about you know

[30 : 52] James and Paul as if they're writing at odds with each other just look at how similar is this description to what Paul writes in Galatians in chapter 5 about the fruit of the spirit love joy peace long suffered gentleness goodness faith meekness temperance the wisdom that is from above is first pure then peaceable gentle easy to be entreated full of mercy and good fruits without partiality without hypocrisy this is the fruit of the spirit this is the wisdom that is from above this is what the Lord gives this chastity and purity this peaceableness desiring to be at peace with one another this gentleness meekness of heart easy to be entreated long suffering we could say full of mercy blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy and good fruits without partiality without hypocrisy and the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace again think the sermon of the month blessed are the peacemakers they should be called the children of

God but all of this there is a sense in which our human nature our earthly nature does rebel against it because we think well why should I always be the one to bite my tongue and to take second place when there that person is off pushing himself and getting the limelight and getting the glory he seems to be hitting all the popularity and success and here I am plodding along here not getting much in the wheel encouragements or limelight or anything like that no he's patting me on the back and giving me applause or whatever why should I be down here why should I be restraining myself biting my down because this is part of what the spirit enables us to do ah yes well what's in it for me well here's a key thing in this verse the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace psalm 97 we do it verse 11 light is sown for the righteous and gladness for the upright in heart now if something is sown if seed is sown it is in the sense of to bring forth a later abundance to bring forth a harvest and the fruits of time when you sow the seed you don't see the harvest right away bring it up the next day when you sow you have to wait you have to bide your time James himself talks about this you know later on in his letter you know he says about how that husbandman waits for the fruit and for the harvest in the fullness of time be patient therefore verse 7 of chapter 5 my brethren unto the coming of the Lord behold the husbandman waited for the precious fruit of the earth and had long patience for it until you see the early and latter rain be he also patient establish your hearts for the coming of the Lord draw up night the fruit of righteousness is so in peace peace is as it were the soil into which this seed is cast yes we have to for now take the place of meekness take the place of biting our tongue restraining what we have long to burst out with and assert a bit of righteous indignation and just fight back and just hit back and show that we're not going to be trodden down we're not going to be ridden over roughshod but this is not what the

Lord did when he smote it on one sheep he turned to them the other when he was reviled he reviled not again as a sheep a lamb before our sheeters is dumb so he opened of his mouth he was taken as a lamb to the slaughter he was quiet and meek but now where is he now enthroned at the right hand of glory before whom all the heavens and the earth shall gather and every knee shall bow and all those who will oppose themselves to them will be compelled to acknowledge Jesus as Lord now this is the same Jesus who says in Revelation I'll get you to sit up with me in my throne you'll sit up there with me in my throne your glory will come your day of blessing and of being in the limelight and the glory of heaven you'll have plenty of that here you've only got a limited limelight for a brief time there you've got eternity of the glory of heaven that's the harvest which what is sown here will bring forth the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace if we are to have peace between

God and man which is what we have experienced if we are in Christ then we have to live that out so that the words we speak and the life we live harmonize with each other they are in tune with each other and so that even if people hate what we represent even if they hate the Lord that we serve they will not be able to say that we are at odds with him they will not be able to say that we are inconsistent with him or that our words don't match our eyes we shouldn't strive to be up there as teachers we'll receive a stricter judgment and we all stumble and we all fall but one way in which we can begin to restrain the evil which we so readily commit because it's in our nature is to bridle in the town and let it be used only for that for which it was designed for good for blessing and for the praise of God to bear in on