

James 3:1-12

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[0 : 00] with James and some words of encouragement mixed in. And James' point in all of this is to say that you are becoming perfect.

If you believe in God, if you have trusted in him, you are becoming perfect in the midst of this life. You are being made whole, in other words, by receiving Jesus' commands and obeying them in how you live.

But the two key parts in pursuing this perfection, the two key things that James says needs to be pursued are not being pursued by the reader.

For James, if you are going to be made whole, if you are going to be perfected, you need to pursue wisdom from God and you need to pursue true religion. Those are the two things that he would hold up.

And the problem, as we read through this book, the problem that we see is we fail in both of these ways. True religion to James means caring for the needy, taming the tongue, being apart from the world.

[1 : 08] But how often we struggle with that, he says, and how quickly we rely on our own wisdom for the next day and not God's. But that's what perfects us, James says.

That's what transforms us each day into God's Son's image. So, just three things from these 12 verses. Three things on guarding the tongue.

One of the aspects of this true religion that James tells us to go after. Three things. The power of the tongue, the difficulty of controlling the tongue, and the two-sided nature of the tongue.

So, the power of the tongue. James opens this section with a warning to those who teach or those who want to teach and become teachers. And he warns them, hey, ultimately not to do it.

It's not something many of them should pursue. And the reason he says this in his own words is because we all stumble, he says. And if we all stumble, if we all act in a way that is against God's standard, then it's a huge risk for those whose profession it is to speak.

[2 : 21] To use your tongue, which can be so prone to speaking sinfully. And the day that James was writing in public speaking, it was something that was very respected.

It was a position that would place you above those around you. And it gave you some level of protection or comfort in that society. Not in our world, James says.

Not here in the circles that we operate in. It means responsibility. It doesn't mean comfort. It means being held to account because it's a dangerous part of your body.

And how much more opportunity you have to say things you ought not to say. How much easier it is to speak sinfully when all you do is speak.

Some would come to these 12 verses and say that these verses are all aimed at the teacher or preacher and all the warnings are to them.

[3 : 25] It's unlikely that that's the case. It's far more likely that these 12 verses are for each of us and for all believers. James talks about people who aren't teachers becoming teachers.

And then he says we all stumble. It's far more likely that he's using this opening verses as a springboard for the rest of us to be brought into this conversation.

How serious a role it is to be the one who teaches. Well, even for the rest of the church, he says. How important it is to know how powerful the tongue can be.

So to all of us, James says, beware of the power of the tongue. In verse 2, he makes this statement saying that whoever really does watch every word that comes out of their mouth, he says he's the perfect man.

If he can do that, then he is the perfect man. He's crossed the finish line. The goal has been reached. Verse 8, it tells us that that's not going to happen.

[4 : 31] That's not the case. But James goes further than that. He says if that is the case, then you can direct your whole body. And that is going to happen.

He's got one thing right there. You might not be able to grasp perfection just by speaking well all the time, but one thing is for sure. You will direct your whole body.

See the horse with a bridle in its mouth steering the whole body. See the ship that is guided by such a small rudder taking through the strongest winds and storms.

All of this to say that your tongue guides you, it directs you into good and evil. One writer, one commentator says it guides us into safety or it guides us into peril.

It's not the case in verse 2 that the one who masters his tongue masters his whole body. If I can say that I do not sin with my mouth and I don't need to worry about what my hand is doing and my eyes, that's not what James is saying.

[5 : 41] He's saying that you can guide your whole direction by how you speak. So if I speak kindly and mercifully and truthfully, then I will surely be walking nearer to God and living more in line with how I am expected to live.

But with this tiny member of my body, if I speak boastfully or harshly or impatiently, if I speak crudely or if I lie, then it directs my whole being away from him.

By the great power of such a small member of your body, you sin against God and direct yourself away from him like a bridle in the mouth of a horse, like the rudder of a boat.

I direct the whole self toward good or evil. I find myself either becoming more Christ-like or I disobey the God of all the universe just by speaking.

That's the power that the tongue has. What about the difficulty of controlling the tongue? Then James tells us in verse 5 that the tongue boasts of great things.

[7 : 00] It boasts of its power. And he moves on and he tells us the outcome of this power. The outcome being the tongue becomes very difficult to control. Verses 5-6 give us probably the most vivid picture of how uncontrollable the tongue is in the whole of the Bible.

And it's because of this lack of control it means that the tongue has this capacity for serious harm. Something I see often at home at the end of the year or the start of the year and I guess it happens down here as well on the moorland is burning the heather.

The crafters would do this to burn away the dried out heather this heather that loses its nutrition the sheep can't eat it so they go and burn it away and leave space for the new roots to come through.

Often if it goes unchecked even for a few seconds this results in this great fire taking over the land taking over the crops taking over acres and acres of land and everything is gone in a moment and often when I'm home in the winter in the pitch black night the darkness is lit up by this fire miles and miles away that has been left uncontrolled.

James says in its natural state the tongue is a fire and very quickly it will burn down the whole forest. In other words our tongue has the scope for such a huge impact and once we have spoken we have no control over how great that impact is going to be.

[8 : 48] So much good can be built up so much good can be done by us we can build relationships we can pursue material and social good we have opportunities to show kindness and care towards those around us but the tongue is so uncontrollable that in a moment you can burn it down.

The book of Proverbs which James draws on often in his letter it has a lot to say on this chapter 12 verse 18 there is one there is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts but the tongue of the wise brings healing 13 verse 3 whoever guards his mouth preserves his life he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin chapter 15 verse 2 the tongue of the wise commends knowledge but the mouths of fools pour out folly all of these verses and more tell us one thing our lives are like the forest and the moment that fire is lit the moment we use the tongue rashly we have the capacity to burn it down more than that James carries on in the same verse 6 this verse seems to divide many of the commentators but it's most likely that in verse 6 the tongue is characterizing itself here in our translation it says the tongue is set among our members but likely the better reading is that the tongue appoints itself among our members the tongue appoints itself as the world of unrighteousness in James' language the tongue appoints itself as the one that expresses evil and it can do this in a way that no other member of your body can do you know you think of how quickly we can speak and the great harm we do in so few words no wonder

James says the tongue boasts about this it does it all without the help of the rest of our bodies just to end this point James speaks about how we've we've managed even to tame and control beings completely separate from us he talks about beast and bird and reptile and sea creature but no one has ever tamed the tongue you can tame these things but you can't tame the tongue and because of that what's the outcome this member which he says is set on fire by hell which is evil by his very nature he says determines our course think of all that can change in a moment especially especially harmful and destructive change whether between me and one person or between me and many people think of how our paths are determined by how we speak whether in a greater or a lesser sense

I can determine my course by how I use my tongue that's the difficulty of controlling it it sets itself above the rest of your members the rest of your body and it sets your course the last point that we mentioned and just really quickly there's the two-sided nature to the tongue as well even as Christians we don't escape the seriousness of this issue verse 9 I can go to church I can come here and praise God and pray to him but when I leave when I go into the rest of the week I can turn and speak harmfully about the person that he has made in his image I can bless him but curse his creation and like a spring pouring both salt and fresh water like a fig tree producing bear olives or a grapevine figs like a salt pond holding fresh water

James says it makes no sense how can I bless in a moment and curse the next it's not supposed to be like that he says I can't praise God and speak well of him and turn and use my words the next moment like the writer of the proverb says like a thrusting sword the problem here is when I talk about God's creation when I talk about the people that he has made and when I bring them low I'm saying something about God because he has made them and this person who the psalmist says is fearfully and wonderfully made I have to be saying something ultimately about God when I speak harmfully about them who he has made look at Peter tells Jesus to his face he's never going to deny him three times he says he doesn't know

[14 : 20] Jesus as soon as he is away from him that's the two sided nature of the tongue I might bless God in a moment but how easy it can be to turn on the person beside me it doesn't make sense it can't do both and yet James says it does so he sets these three points to us the tongue has great power it is difficult to even begin controlling the tongue and the tongue is in his nature two sided it gets worse than that James for all that James says Jesus comes along and he says more in Matthew's gospel Jesus he's on the road and he comes across this demon possessed man this blind and mute man and he heals him he makes him well and the Pharisees see this and the Pharisees say surely this is the work of

Beelzebub surely this is the work of Satan and they have attributed the work of God to the work of the devil they have blasphemed in a way that will never be forgiven and Jesus turns and he identifies the problem and though they have spoken this accusation probably in haste Jesus turns and he says what the real problem is Matthew 12:34 you brood of vipers how can you speak good when you are evil for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks Jesus says the problem isn't necessarily the tongue the problem is your heart the tongue might be powerful and it might be difficult to control but it's because of the state of your heart that you can't control it though you can try and cover it up the mouth is bound at some point to say exactly what your heart believes and love your neighbor when you refuse to tame the tongue when you ignore the attitude of your heart and that spills into your speech you do away with Jesus' command that's the seriousness of what

James is saying your tongue only says what your heart believes your tongue only says what your heart is thinking and when you don't deal with the issue of your heart you'll never deal with the power or the uncontrollable nature of your tongue think of what happens when the tongue sets the forest on fire gossip will break people's trust in you truly meant insults will put people against you and turn them away from you hatred and critical speech will kill people's love and affection for you relationships you have built up over years opportunities that you have had to build and encourage people over years can be done away with because of the tongue how much more damage it can do in a moment than the rest of the body but Jesus says only because the heart allows it we've had three points on the nature of the tongue one to say that it's worse than that the heart is the issue one more point five points today the heart the heart is sustained by Jesus in Jesus' meeting with

Nicodemus he makes this promise to all people you will be given a new heart if you believe the sin that condemns you to punishment will be dealt with and remembered no more you will be made alive and one day you will be in God's presence and yet despite the promise of a new heart one of the problems we know we face is our old nature trying to emerge again and again I'm new in God's eyes but still sin emerges and still I can speak how I ought not to speak still my heart can cause my tongue to speak harmfully Jesus he appears in Isaiah 50 he's called the servant in this prophecy and he says this in the seventh verse the Lord God has given me an instructed tongue that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary

Jesus speaks all that is commanded to him by the father he speaks with an instructed tongue and to the one who is weary to the one who knows their struggles to the one who knows and understands their hearts to the one who knows that even with this new heart they still stumble to the one who speaks with a powerful uncontrollable two-sided tongue to that person he comes and he says he will sustain them he says no wrong but he draws near and to the weary hearts struggling with life and struggling with sin he says he will sustain you in the next chapter of James in chapter four he's talking about being in the world and the problem that his first readers had of living as if they were still in the world they show no sign really of being separate and he is obviously pained by this but almost out of nowhere in this chapter four he's going in on them and out of nowhere he says but he gives more grace you struggle with how you speak you struggle with being a part of the world and not living differently to it well

[22 : 04] God gives more grace to you he gives the power to live well do we struggle with how we use the tongue do we find that even with this new heart we are still prone to sin and prone to wander away from him Jesus speaks perfectly to sustain us I will give you rest he says and here in James' letter he says here is even more grace on top of that for the pain that sin causes in our lives for the pain that speaking wrongly can cause it will not separate God's people from him here is yet more grace he says that you will have power to live as you are meant to what can we say how can we respond when we understand our own failings and yet God comes and he says here is more grace for you and one condition that we humble ourselves before

God grace here is promised to the one who humbles themselves to the one who at least acknowledges the problem that their tongue is who at least acknowledges the sin that can spring up in their heart which causes their tongue to speak we humble ourselves by acknowledging these things and submitting ourselves to God the one who helps us through it James says we are becoming perfect and we will be perfected at the end of time and that happens because when we humble ourselves God says here is more grace for you to battle this sin to to battle that nature in your heart to kill that sin here is more grace for you that you can speak well tomorrow for the one who struggles to tame the tongue here is grace here is the power to live so that you will kill sin and so that your tongue will be tamed here is

Jesus who sustains the weary here is grace so that all we can say all that we can speak with our tongue is of how great our God is the one who saved us and the one who will continue to perfect us until we go to be with him let's pray lord we thank you for your word we thank you for these verses and again the seriousness of it lord and we pray ultimately that we would humble ourselves before you we would submit to you we would throughout this day acknowledge how our sinful hearts how sin keeps emerging and how it pours out into our speech lord as we acknowledge these things lord we pray for yet more grace we thank you that you are the god who says this who says here is more grace so that we might continue on this road of being perfected and continue this life until we are with you and we are perfected and sin will not hold us or cling to us anymore lord we look forward to that day when we will not fall we will not fail anymore it grieves us even today thinking of how we can do these things how we can speak uncontrollably and how we can speak powerfully in a harmful way but yet at the end of time we will be perfected and we will be in your presence and we will be sinless all because of you and your work in our lives so help us with these things lord we pray in

Jesus name amen