

Contradictions? James 3:1-12

In the One Church statement of beliefs, that you can view on our church website, there are statements concerning the truth and trustworthiness of scripture. One of my favorite statements says that scripture is the *“supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried.”* Now with that being said, there are many places in the Bible that at first glance perhaps seem to be confusing, or contradicting with other parts of scripture. And in those cases, we must dig a little deeper, put on our Bible scholar hats, and attempt to use scripture in order to interpret scripture. And quite often the answer to assumed contradictions, is that we aren't understanding the manner in which a particular verse was meant to be taken, or perhaps there's misunderstanding over a different usage of a word used elsewhere, or there are cultural, linguistic, and/or context clues that help to reconcile what is thought to be a contradiction. And at the same time, there is still some mystery to some of the things we read, and in those areas we should be careful not to pridefully assume we have all the answers figured out, but rather we engage in conversations with one another, and press into the Lord, seeking His wisdom as we wrestle with His word together.

As Pastor Dave mentioned last Sunday, there have been controversial conversations concerning supposed contradictions contained in the book of James, dating all the way back to the 1500s with Martin Luther. And as Pastor Dave defended last week, he and I are in agreement that the book of James doesn't contradict anything that Paul said, but rather James' and Pauls' teaching go hand in hand. They are two sides to the same coin. Believers are justified before God because of *faith*, and yet faith is expressed and demonstrated through *action*. And as we look at James chapter 3, we see that there is yet more potential controversy that we have to deal with this morning. Are you ready for it? Man, we're children of the King of the Universe, we don't fear no controversy, right!? **James 3, verse 1...**

Ok, this verse is controversial on a couple different levels. In looking at this verse this week, my first reaction was, no- actually we need more good teachers who will teach the teaching of Jesus! There is quite consistently at least one or more churches within even Transylvania county always in need of a Pastor. My heart cries out, “No, we need to raise up more teachers who will properly handle God's word, who won't follow a trend of just giving a pep talk on Sunday mornings supported by a few scriptures here and there. No, we need solid teachers who will take us through God's word, verse by verse, chapter by chapter, teaching, leading, helping us apply scripture to our day to day lives- not skipping the hard stuff, wrestling with the original meaning and intent, clarifying, unwilling to compromise to culture and modern-day popular opinions- can we get some more of these type teachers?” Right? I'm thinking, “Let's get as many as possible striving to be this type of teacher- that's what our world needs.”

And then all of a sudden I was like, wait a second, what did Jesus command His followers to do, before He left the earth? **Matthew 28:18-20**, Jesus says *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. 19 Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to follow all that I commanded you; and behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”* Jesus says all the authority is His- in other words- what He says goes. No one has the right or the authority to say otherwise- Jesus’ word is the beginning and end, He has the first and final say, no one can contradict Him- all authority is His. And in that ultimate authority He tells those who follow Him to: go make disciples (make followers/believers) of people in all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, AND teach them to follow all that He commanded. Jesus isn’t saying here to be careful of how many Christians become teachers, no, quite the opposite- He’s saying if you are His follower then *you are* to be a teacher! Everyone who follows Jesus is to be a teacher to others, teaching them the things Jesus commanded.

Even Paul, writing to Timothy (who was a young up and coming Pastor), Paul tells him this: *“And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.”* (**2 Tim 2:2**) Paul is saying, find others to teach, and then have them become teachers as well. Paul is telling Timothy to multiple himself, to multiply teachers, to *grow* the number of spiritual teachers. And the word “teach,” or “teaching” in these verses is the same Greek word we have in James 3:1, it’s just the noun form instead of the verb form. So what on earth is James talking about in saying “don’t too many of you become teachers?” In order to dispel any contradiction, the question we must ask ourselves is, is there a different type of usage in scripture for the word “teacher” that is used here in James, that might be different than the usage of the word “teaching” in Matthew and 2 Timothy?

So you get out an old fashioned Bible concordance, or look online at a resource like biblehub.com, there you can click on the Greek interlinear Bible, it will show you the Greek words with English words underneath, and you can click above the Greek word on the number that represents that Greek word and it will take you to a concordance that shows you all the other scriptures that use that same word. And what we find in this instance, is that all of the instances of this word being used, are in reference to Jesus and/or the religious leaders being a Rabbi, a *Master* as the King James Version says, a Guru, a formal religious teacher in the tradition of formal Judaism. You have verses like, when the rich young ruler came to Jesus and said *“Teacher, what good thing shall I do so that I may obtain eternal life?”* (**Matt. 19:16**) This man, in the usage of the word “teacher” was basically saying, “Jesus, you are recognized as a Master in the law. Please judge the worthiness of my law-keeping ability.” Or you have the verse where Pharisees sent their people to catch Jesus in a trap, and they came to Him and asked “Teacher, is it permissible to pay

a poll-tax to Caesar?” They were coming to Jesus and admitting to Him (whether authentically or inauthentically) that Jesus was a Guru and judge of political and financial morality. In Jesus’ time, to be a teacher or a master was to be a Black Belt Sensei concerning pronouncing laws and judgements.

One of the other verses shown in the concordance is Matthew 23:8. Jesus is speaking to His followers and to a crowd of people, and in the whole chapter He is calling out the Pharisees for their religious hypocrisy, pride in their position of power, and their injustices towards others. And Jesus says to the people in verse 8 *“But as for you, do not be called Rabbi; for only One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers and sisters.”*

I think what’s going on here, is that Jesus is saying to the people of that time, don’t be a teacher like the teachers you currently know of in Judaism. Rather realize Jesus is the truest representation of what that word “teacher” is meant to be- and no one can come close to filling the shoes of Jesus, so that official title in the manner that it has been used in the past and currently, is to now essentially be done away with. And thus, later when Jesus gives the great commission in Matthew 28, he says to teach others to follow all that He commanded. In others words, followers of THE teacher are to just point to the teachings of that one true teacher. They need not worry themselves with becoming a wise guru teacher in of themselves, all they need to do is just pass on what has already been taught. They don’t need to make judgments from their own wisdom, judge others actions, make their own public decrees about morality and the Law of Moses- no- Jesus has already done all that, just teach in the sense of presenting to others what Jesus has already taught. And thus, *everyone*- every follower of Jesus, *all of you guys*, are to be a teacher in that sense of the word.

And so now, back to James 3, remember James is writing to Jewish background believers, and so I think the type of “teacher” he is discouraging them from becoming, is the other type of teacher- the formal Jewish religious guru judging type of teacher. So please don’t read this, and be fearful that you’re not smart enough to ever teach, or that you’re unequipped to enter into spiritual conversations with someone else. No, be a teacher that points others to THE Teacher, you don’t have to have all the answers, just point people toward the One who does have all the answers. If you feel the Lord nudging you a little concerning being a better day to day great commission type teacher, or perhaps nudging you to explore possibilities of teaching in our Kids Ministry, or perhaps facilitating a small group, or maybe you even feel the Lord calling you to Pastoral type teaching ministry- don’t dismiss that nudging, don’t down play it, come and talk to us and we’d love to pray with you and partner with you in helping you explore what God might be calling you to in your life.

Then this verse could also be controversial in how it says teachers will incur a stricter judgment. One pastor jokingly commented that we *shouldn’t* interpret this verse

to mean *“Teaching people about Jesus is a dangerous occupation more likely to send you to Hell than any other.”* That’s not what James is saying. We know that James can’t be referring to a salvation, Heaven or Hell type of Judgement, because Jesus Himself said that the *“one who believes in Him is not judged.”* (John 3:18a) James is writing to believers, so James must be talking about a different type of judgment. **1 Corinthians 3:11-15** seems to reference a different type of judgement for a believer in Christ. It says *“For no one can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or straw, 13 each one’s work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each one’s work. 14 If anyone’s work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. 15 If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet only so as through fire.”* These verses are indicating that someone can have the solid foundation of Jesus Christ- in other words, they are saved, and yet the manner in which they build upon that foundation, will be judged in the end. Their salvation is not in jeopardy- no, they are saved having built on the one and only foundation of Jesus, but the quality, the authenticity of the things they say and do will in the end be judged for reward or for loss of reward. Again, the reward of Heaven is not in question- that reward remains, but it seems there are additional blessings, treasures, rewards available for those who follow Jesus.

There are several verses throughout the New Testament that seem to point to this idea of rewards. **Luke 12:33** Jesus says *“Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves money belts that do not wear out, an inexhaustible treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near nor does a moth destroy.”* **Matthew 6:2-4** *“So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, so that they will be praised by people. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. 3 But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your charitable giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.”* **Matthew 10:41** *“The one who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet’s reward; and the one who receives a righteous person in the name of a righteous person shall receive a righteous person’s reward.”* **Matthew 16:27** *“For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and will then repay every person according to his deeds.”*

In light of these passages speaking of rewards, and in light of what Jesus says concerning no judgment for His followers, it would seem that James is speaking not of judging bad works/sins- those are all covered under the sacrifice of Jesus, but rather he is speaking of judging *good* things said and done- the true goodness, the true authenticity, the true motive behind things appearing to be “good” on this earth. If the things are truly

good, authentic, said and done with pure motives- then there will be extra reward. If not, if someone is doing or saying the right thing but for the wrong reasons, then that “good thing” will be invalidated and there will not be a reward based on it. And so I think James is saying someone who sets themselves up as a judge, guru, master, teacher will be analyzed, reviewed, judged for their good works at a higher level of scrutiny. So don’t be a self proclaimed judge, guru, master, teacher- rather, again, just be a teacher that points others to THE teacher, because it is really easy to say the wrong thing, and commit our own personal contradictions, verse 2... **(verses 2-6)**.

The tongue, though it is small, has much power for good and for bad. As a small bit in a horse’s mouth has the power to control the rest of it’s large body, and as a small rudder determines the direction a whole giant ship moves, as a small fire can turn into a massive raging forest fire- so a small tongue has the ability to sin greatly. As verse 6 says, the tongue (our mouths, the way we speak) is a whole world of unrighteousness. It causes harm to our whole body, it effects not just those around us, but it greatly effects our own life and the course that our life takes. Hell itself seems to accomplish it’s agenda through the fire of our tongues. Verse 7... **(7-12)**

If you’ve ever been to a circus, you’ve probably seen some fierce animals like lions or tigers being told by humans what to do. There was even recently a video from Russia that went viral of guys working out in the forest with a bear participating in the workout. James is almost saying- you’re probably safer doing that kind of thing than allowing your words to get out of control. You’re probably safer hanging out with Grizzly bears than hanging out with someone who can’t control the words they speak. And verses 9 and 10 have always seemed really heavy to me; how is it that we praise God- we bless His name- and then out of the same mouth speak ugliness to others? Talk about controversy! As James says, things should not be this way. For a follower of Jesus, it should not be like that. A spring of water doesn’t produce bad water *and* good water. A fig tree doesn’t grow olives on it, nor does a grape vine grow figs. That which makes salt water salty, doesn’t sometimes also make fresh water- the two don’t mix. A diesel truck don’t run on gas. In the same way, the follower of Jesus, who confesses Jesus as Lord, isn’t to speak in such a way that is unfitting for a follower of Jesus. The words we speak aren’t to contradict ourselves.

When I lived in South America, our base camp home had a water reservoir on top of a tall concrete tower. Water was pumped from the ground, up into the reservoir, and then it would gravity feed down to the house when you turned on a faucet inside. There was a particular time when the water one day seemed to have a strange smell and taste to it, and at first, I just thought it was just me, missing the good ol’ mountain water of Western North Carolina. Then some of the other guys noticed it, and it didn’t seem like it was going away, so we had someone come and inspect the system, and what they found was

three tree frogs had squeezed up under the lid of the reservoir, and had died inside. The frogs had polluted the entire large reservoir of water. Something so small, had messed up something so big. And that's what can happen with our words. Some of the things we say, in the moment, can seem so insignificant and small, and yet those words can have expanding, lingering, dangerous effects not only to us, but to those around us.

Luke 6:45 says *"The good person out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil person out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart."* Now, this is where this gets a little uncomfortable. This verse likens our heart to a type of reservoir that is able to be filled with good or bad. And so when we open the faucet of our mouth, what comes out is that which is contained in the reservoir of our heart. I believe we *like to think* that what's in our heart is completely separate from the things we speak- like our mouths just have a mind of their own and we can totally say things disconnected from how we truly feel inside- but that's not the idea the Bible presents. Rather, the heart and mouth are connected. The mouth displays the truer sense of what is inside. The heart is like your suitcase at the airport, and your mouth is the Xray machine with the display screen.

And perhaps we wrestle time and time again with, "man, I always say the wrong thing, I wish I could do better in how I engage in conversations, and control my temper." Maybe it's been really difficult to change how words fly out. But the solution might not be just trying harder to control words, the solution might be dealing with the dead frogs that are in the heart reservoir. You see, the negative words that come out are more like the check engine light on our car dashboard. They are more like displaying a symptom of a deeper internal problem. And those warning lights are not to be taken lightly. Listen to what Jesus says in Matthew 12, He says *"But I tell you that for every careless word that people speak, they will give an account of it on the day of judgment. 37 For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."* (**Matt. 12:36-37**) Again, I know some people are thinking, "wait- no, we're only justified by faith in Jesus, right?" Yes, justified by faith alone, you can't earn your way into Heaven. But as James chapter 2 argued, your faith is displayed by your actions and by your words. Faith is all you need, but the proof, the evidence of that faith, is something that is expressed in word and deed.

Now what this passage calls for, I believe, is an honest personal assessment of the things that come out of our mouth. Are we able to recall conversations that could have gone better, or outbursts of anger that seem unfitting for a Christian, or patterns of talking down to others, or times of being short tempered with our words? If the answer is yes, then we have to ask ourselves first "Have I ever fully surrendered to Jesus and believed on Him? Have I made that conscious decision to receive Him into my life, and fully given Him the drivers seat, or have I just been treating Christianity as a sort of social club?" Perhaps the words that come out are only an indicator that the heart has not been

truly changed inside. If you have never fully surrendered to the Lordship of Jesus, I invite you to do that today, and I would love to talk with you and pray with you after the service to help you do that this morning.

Now, perhaps there are others who are fully confident that you have received Jesus as Lord of your life, but you still struggle with your words from time to time. I'll admit this is me too. Recently I've been working on this personally, and I've come to realize that my anger, my course words are usually not directly resulting from the situation at hand, but they are coming forth in that present situation due to other unrelated stressors. And so I'm learning to do some deeper digging, and figure out why my heart is sometimes restless, what perspectives do I have that need to change, in what areas am I not fully trusting God, why am I allowing some circumstances to build up pressure in my life, in other words- why am I allowing frogs to squeeze in and poison my heart water, and how do I get them out? And I want to encourage you to do the same. Perhaps one of the most significant relationships, the relationship of marriage, is one where words are quick to get out of hand. I read this week a marriage counselor say that "There is almost no such thing as a bad marriage where the couple speaks well to each other." Whether words quickly go bad with a spouse, or with kids, or at work, or with other family, or with friends, or even when we're by ourselves- I believe the Lord wants us to live free of contradictions in our words, to get rid of any controversies between our hearts and mouths, to work on bringing forth good out of our hearts, and thus good out of our mouths.

But if you feel this is something the Lord is encouraging you to fix, I'm not going to suggest that you can properly fix this in the space of a few minutes in a closing prayer, right here right now; nor is there a one-size fits all solution to fetching out potential frogs in a heart reservoir. It might be that you need to more consistently spend time with the Lord in prayer and reading His word, it might be that you need to join a small group that will cheer you on in your walk, you might consider attending the next Pain to Purpose class we're offering in January, you might need to bounce some ideas off a trusted friend or a pastor, you might need to set aside a block of time to retreat into the woods to think clearly, pray undistractedly, and rest from life's chaos. But this morning, choose to make a step in the right direction, in committing before the Lord to act on what we've read this morning. And Pastor Dave and I would love the opportunity to pray with you concerning that as well after the service, or talk with you about some of the ways the church might be able to help resource you in your journey with the Lord.