

***TRUE FAITH IS SEEN IN SELF-CONTROL***

In chapter 2 the author used the outward production of works as a test of true faith. But the work of faith also has inward effects including self-control which is most readily seen in the proper use of the tongue. James has alluded to the tongue in 1:19 & 26 and 2:12, but in now in chapter 3 verses 1-12 he expands upon it. The section can be divided as follows:

1. the importance of controlling our tongue (3:1-2)
2. the need to control our tongue (3:3-6)
3. the difficulty controlling our tongue (3:7-8)
4. the inconsistency in using our tongue (3:9-12)

***The importance of controlling our tongue (3:1-2)***

**3:1 Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment.**

The Holy Spirit has gifted certain people with the ability to understand the Word of God and effectively communicate to others (teachers -I Cor. 12:28; Pastor/teachers - Eph. 4:11; elders- I Ti. 3:2). Verse 1 is not trying to discourage people who are gifted in teaching from using their gift for God wants us to use what He has given us (Matt. 25:14 ff.). Rather, James wants teachers to take seriously their responsibility and to know that they are accountable for what they say.

The Bible clearly teaches that the greater the responsibility, the stricter the judgment. Jesus said, "everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required" (Lk. 12:48) and that "every careless word that men shall speak shall render account of it in the day of judgment" (Matt. 12:36). Both of these comments apply to a teacher in a unique way. The early church was patterned after the synagogue service and the teacher, like the Rabbi, filled an authoritative position. "Since the teacher's work is performed primarily through his use of the tongue, the controlled use of the tongue is of central importance for the Christian teacher" (Hiebert, 204).

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When James speaks of judgment he is no doubt referring the Judgment Seat of Christ (I Cor. 3:10-15; Ro. 14:10-12; I Tim. 5:24) where believers' works will be judged, not their salvation.

**3:2 For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.**

Although verse 2 supplies the reason why people need to be cautious about becoming teachers, James expands his discussion to "*we all who stumble.*" Every believer, not just teachers, need to consider how they use their mouth.

To "stumble" is to trip so as to veer off our intended path or to slow our progress in our daily walk. Morally, it is to sin or to do something worthy of condemnation. The present tense verb indicates that it is a repeated problem for all believers. We all stumble over and over again and we do so in many different ways, not just in speech.

The tongue is so difficult to tame that James says if a person can control it he can control everything else as well. In fact, a perfectly bridled (restrained) tongue shows that the person is perfect. Of course, James doesn't mean that the person is sinless since he has just said that we all stumble. What he means is that if we can gain control over the most unruly member of the body we will also be able to control the rest and in doing so demonstrate that we are spiritually mature (cf. the same usage of "perfect" [τέλειος- teleios] is found in the writings of Paul in Phil 3:15; Eph. 4:13; Col. 4:12; and the author of Hebrews in Heb. 5:14).

***The need to control our tongue (3:3-6)***

"Little things have far-reaching effects, and though the tongue is little it has great potential for both usefulness and destruction. Three illustrations are utilized to demonstrate this: a horse's bit (v.3), a ship's rudder (v. 4), and a fire (vv. 5, 6)" (Doerksen, 76).

**3:3 Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they may obey us, we direct their entire body as well.**

James' comment about bridling the tongue leads to an illustration of a bit used to control a horse. The bit is the part of the bridle that is placed in the horse's mouth. By controlling the horse's head, the rider can control its body as well. A very small object can control a powerful animal.

**3:4 Behold, the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder, wherever the inclination of the pilot desires.**

James' second illustration is like the first, but is related to oceangoing vessels. Just as a small bit in a horse's mouth controls the whole horse, so does the small rudder on a large ship. The slightest turn of the rudder will change the course of a massive vessel in spite of winds and seas that resist its course. The person who controls the rudder can cause the ship to go wherever he wants it to go. These two illustrations show that something very small has controlling power over great things.

**3:5 So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. Behold, how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!**

The rudder and a bit exercise great power though they are very small. So it is with the tongue. It's small, but it boasts of great things since incalculable power can be released from it.

The power of the tongue can cause great good or great damage. In this case James is concerned with the damage. Just as acres of land can be ravaged with nothing more than a match, so the tongue can cause vast damage (cf. Prov. 16:27).

**3:6 And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell.**

James has described the tongue as a bit and a rudder. He now expands upon the tongue as a fire, the world of iniquity.

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The tongue, like fire, is destructive in nature (Psa. 57:4; 120:3-4; Pro. 16:27; 26:18-21) and is potentially dangerous if left uncontrolled.

It is also "the world of iniquity." "World" can refer to an orderly system. If that is what James intended then he would be saying that it is a system of iniquity, and as such it has a huge range of influence.

The tongue is set (appointed) among our members. "Set" can be a middle or a passive voice in Greek. That is, this could mean, the tongue "has set itself" (i.e. it appointed itself over the body = middle voice) or the tongue "is set" (i.e. it has placed over the body by someone else [either by us or by God] = passive voice). In James 4:4 the same verbal form is found and there it is a middle voice, so this is probably also preferred here. In other words, James is most likely saying that the tongue has established itself to rule over the body by self-appointment. Though it is designed to be a member that dispenses grace to others, when it is left uncontrolled it can be a vast system of evil (Doerksen, 79).

The tongue defiles the entire body. An uncontrolled tongue is morally defiling. It imparts a moral stain that contaminates the whole body (i.e. the whole personality).

The rest of the verse tells how the tongue imparts moral defilement to the body (Hiebert, 216). Namely, it "sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell."

"Sets on fire the course of our life" is better translated as "sets on fire the wheel of nature" (Hiebert, 217). Γένεσις (*genesis*) "nature" may also mean "birth or "origin" It is the word from which the English word "Genesis" is derived. "Wheel" has the idea of a "course" or a "running" - and is a circular idea. In other words, some idea of a cyclical action is implied. Since the previous comment spoke of the impact of the tongue on the whole body of the individual, this expression seems to widen the impact beyond personal defilement to defilement of others. James seems to be thinking of the wheel of human existence, of which we are part. Thus he is saying that our relationships to others are also set on fire by an uncontrolled tongue (for example, gossip or slander will spread and set a whole community on fire).

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But the tongue also allows itself to be set on fire by hell (*gehenna*).  
Satanic influence affects the tongue.

In Matthew 5:22 Jesus refers to "the fire of Hell," literally, "the gehenna of fire." The expression "gehenna of fire" comes from the Hebrew *ge-hinnom*, or the Valley of Hinnom. This valley was a ravine south of Jerusalem that was associated with the god Moloch and his worship which included child sacrifices (II Chr. 28:3; Jer, 7:31). Moloch worship, though condemned by God (Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5), was practiced by some Israelites (Ezek. 23:37) until King Josiah abolished the practices and then defiled the Valley of Hinnom by making it a dumping ground for filth and the corpses of criminals (II Ki. 23:10). In the time of Jesus some suggest that it was still being used as a rubbish pit with fires that smoldered continually. The valley came to symbolize hell, the place of the unbelievers' final destiny.

*Gehenna* can also be used as the seat of Satan's operations (Doerkson, 80). Here it is used of the source of the influence of the evil that is found in *gehenna*. In a similar way Jesus spoke of the Pharisees as sons of *gehenna* (Matt. 23:15). The uncontrolled tongue becomes the tool of Satan to cause further destruction to others.

In these few verses James states that the tongue is the instrument through which the world, the flesh, and Satan can vent their evil.

***The difficulty controlling our tongue (3:7-8)***

**3:7 For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed, and has been tamed by the human race.**

**3:8 But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.**

James is speaking in broad sweeps of the brush naming categories of animals similar to that of *Genesis 9:2* and *I Kings 4:33*. In Jewish thought animals could be divided into three groups; animals of the land, air, and water (*Psa. 8:7-8; I Cor. 15:39*). "Beasts" (larger quadrupeds) and reptiles fit nicely into the first category, birds are typical of the second, and the creatures of the sea (which included both fishes and other aquatic life) make up the third.

This does not mean that every single animal that exists has been tamed by man since "tamed" does not necessarily mean domesticated. The verb means "to subdue, curb, subjugate, or restrain." Elsewhere in the NT it is used of a demoniac who could not be "*controlled*" (i.e. "tamed" -Mk. 5:4). By saying that every type of animal "is tamed" and "has been tamed" he is making reference to evidence both through present observation and in history that man has dominated other forms of life (Gen. 9:2; Psa. 8:6-8; Hiebert. 220).

"But" leads us to the contrast. No one can tame the tongue. It is both a restless evil and full of deadly poison.

"Restless" means unstable in 1:8 and suggests that the tongue is inconsistent in its working. It is unruly, unable to be contained, always on the verge of bursting out of its boundaries. "The adjective suggests the picture of 'some caged but unsubdued wild animal, ever pacing uneasily up and down its den.'" (Hiebert, 221). Examples of a "restless" tongue appear in the verses that follow.

The tongue is also full of deadly poison. Ancient people associated the poison of a snake with its tongue (Psa. 58:4; 140:3; Ro. 3:13). The tongue, like a poisonous snake, is capable of inflicting irreparable damage to those with whom it has contact.

### *The inconsistency in using our tongue (3:9-12)*

**3:9 With it we bless our Lord and Father; and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God;**

**3:10 from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.**

The noblest function of our tongue is its ability to glorify God. To bless someone is to speak well of them. When we bless God we praise His attributes or His works. We admire and respect Him for His greatness. Yet we often turn this instrument of blessing into a tool of evil.

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The Bible teaches that man was made in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26-28; 9:6). This includes dominion (rule - Gen. 1:26 "let him rule over..."), the exercise of will, intellectual faculties (the ability to speak, think, etc.), and other attributes found in God that are conveyable to man (such as love, righteousness, truth, mercy, grace, etc.). Being created in God's image distinguishes mankind from the animal kingdom. We are spiritual, intellectual, and rational beings who possess a moral consciousness.

Some have argued that the image of God in man was destroyed when Adam fell into sin, but the perfect tense in Greek ("*have been made* in the likeness of God") argues against it for it speaks of a past event with continuing results. In other words, the perfect tense suggests that man was made in God's image and continues to possess it. For this reason it is inconsistent to praise and curse men with the same tongue (Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 19, 20).

To curse man who possesses the image of God is to degrade God. Blessing God and cursing His creation is incongruous. Malachi saw a similar inconsistency when he asked, "'Do we not all have one father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously each against his brother so as to profane the covenant of our fathers?'" (Mal. 2:10)

**3:11 Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water?**

**3:12 Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Neither can salt water produce fresh.**

James' common sense approach to life comes from his observation of nature once more.

If we were to happen upon a spring gushing with clear, cool water we would not expect to draw from it and find the first cup sweet and the second cup bitter. No fountain is so inconsistent.

Such inconsistencies are not found in agriculture either. No one has ever planted corn that grew wheat, or had fig trees that produced olives. Neither do we find grapevines that grow figs (cf. Matt. 7:16). In nature, each tree produces after "its kind" as God created it (Gen. 1:11).

There is absolute consistency in all creation, so for us to use our tongue for both evil and good is totally abnormal. Just as fresh water comes from a pure source and a plant produces fruit that is in accordance with its nature so too should we act in accordance with our new nature (II Cor. 5:17; Ro. 6:4; Gal. 6:15; Eph. 4:24).

*James' appeal to demonstrate wisdom (3:13)*

**3:13 Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom.**

Wisdom and understanding are two characteristics that God desires of His people (Deut. 1:13, 15; 4:6 LXX). The prophet Hosea in Hosea 14:9 gives an epilogue to his entire prophecy and says, "Who is wise? He will realize these things. Who is discerning? He will understand them. The ways of the LORD are right; the righteous walk in them, but the rebellious stumble in them." These words in a sense help to define wisdom. A wise man understands what is being said and responds appropriately.

Wisdom and knowledge are nearly synonymous but if any distinction can be made wisdom is moral insight and skill in deciding practical issues of conduct based on a knowledge of God and His Word (Note: This was the Jewish concept of wisdom. The Greeks saw wisdom as abstract knowledge or the ability to solve theoretical issues). This wisdom only comes from a personal relationship to God (Prov. 9:10; I Cor. 2:12-15). Understanding is the knowledge of an expert. It was used of someone who could grasp intricacies and then apply them to new situations. Both words go beyond academics to practical moral and spiritual insight.

James now challenges the one who thinks he possesses wisdom and understanding to demonstrate these traits by his conduct. Just as faith has fruit, so does wisdom. James says, "Let him show it," that is, demonstrate your wisdom through good behavior and deeds of gentleness.

Wisdom shows itself through good (*kalos* -[καλος] beautiful, noble, attractive) behavior (lifestyle, conduct). A moral, God-centered lifestyle

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proves that we possess wisdom and know what is necessary to instruct others.

Deeds, not words, are the proof of the possession of wisdom just as they are proof of faith. In this case, the deeds of the wise (good behavior) are described as gentle. Gentleness is the opposite of arrogance, pride, self-assertiveness. Wisdom expresses itself in a heart that doesn't act contemptuously but deals gently with others.

*The nature of earthly wisdom (3:14-16)*

**3:14 But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth.**

Faith has fruit. Wisdom has fruit. False wisdom also has fruit; bitter jealousy and selfish ambition.

"Jealousy" in English is almost always used negatively, but in Greek the word also had a positive connotation of "zeal" and was used of those zealous for the things of God (II Ki. 10:16; Psa. 69:9 cf. Jn. 2:17). It could also mean "requiring exclusive loyalty" (see Jn. 2:17; II Cor. 7:7; 11:2). For this reason God is called a jealous God (Exo. 20:5; 34:14; Deut 4:24; Zech. 1:14, etc.). Bitter jealousy is the fruit of false wisdom (cf. the literal usage of "bitter" in 3:11). It is possible that James is referring to someone who has a religious zealotry but is antagonistic toward others who do not see things as they do. It is a "bitter zeal." This would fit well with the second term translated by the NASB as "selfish ambition." Although "ambition" is a possible meaning, the Greek word *eritheian* (ἐριθείαν) also means "faction." According to Hiebert, "The basic thought of the term seems to be that of one who, for personal advantage, works to promote a definite cause in an unethical manner. It thus denotes a party spirit, or factiousness. This meaning makes good sense in all its New Testament occurrences (Ro. 2:8; II Cor. 12:20; Gal. 5:20; Phil. 1:17; 2:3; Ja. 3:14, 16)" (Hiebert, 229). In other words, James could very well be speaking of those in the church who are outspoken and aggressive, but their religious zeal is bitter for it causes factions and divisions in the body of Christ.

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Someone who behaves like this is arrogant, not wise, and is warned not to lie against the truth. Someone who is arrogant thinks he is superior to others. By his attitude he is actually repudiating the truth he is professing. (Some see "the truth" as the gospel, which is possible, but not certain.)

**3:15 This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic.**

The wisdom that results in bitter zeal and factions may be called wisdom, but its source is not *God* (Ja. 1:17). It is wisdom created by man that has no moral value (it is earthly), it is not spiritual (it is natural, "soulish" - ψυχική - *psuchike*), it is demonic.

In I Corinthians 1 and 2 Paul also speaks of two types of wisdom; the wisdom of the world (1:20; 2:5-6) and the wisdom of *God* (1:24; 2:7). I Corinthians 2:14 says, "But a natural man (ψυχικός - *psuchikos*) does not accept the things of the Spirit of *God*; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually (πνευματικῶς - *pneumatikos*) appraised." Jude speaks of false teachers and describes them as "ones who cause divisions, worldly-minded (ψυχικοί - *psuchikoi*), devoid of the Spirit (πνεῦμα-*pneuma*)" (v. 19). Wisdom that is "natural" comes from fallen man's mental and emotional impulses, and aligns itself with his aspirations and desires.

This individual is not filled with the Spirit but has yielded to demonic influence. I Timothy 4:1 calls false teaching "doctrines of demons", and in I John 4:1 John warns us to "test the spirits to see whether they are from *God*."

**3:16 For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing.**

"For" introduces the reason for James' strong rebuke. Wherever jealousy and factions exist there is chaos and all types of evil.

The goal of the church is to function as a unified whole. We are to be of the same mind (Phil 1:27) and have the same goals and objectives (Phil. 2:2). We are called "a body" (I Cor. 12:13) - a unit with diversity of members

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(I Cor. 12:14). But sin, especially sins that create factions, are unusually evil and destructive to the church (I Cor. 1:10; 11:18 ff. 12:25). Such actions cannot be from God for they are working contrary to His purposes and call into question the spiritual transformation of the one involved in these things.

***The nature of godly wisdom (3:17-18)***

**3:17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy.**

False wisdom is earthly, unspiritual, and has demonic origin and its fruit is seen in arrogance and actions that result in factions. True wisdom comes from God (present tense verb in Greek indicates that it comes in a continual flow - cf. 1:17; also see Prov. 2:6; 8:22-31) and its fruit is now listed by James.

**Pure:** Wisdom is "first" pure. James is not just listing purity as the first trait of wisdom but is saying that purity saturates every part of the wise man's life. Purity is an inward trait and is basic to all other Christian virtues. It is "clean and undefiled, free from all vices, such as jealousy and party factions. It conveys that thought of shrinking from contamination, of a delicate sensibility to pollution of any kind" (Hiebert, 234).

Purity of heart should not be confused with conformity to rules (Isa. 1:10-17). Even good deeds that don't come from a pure heart do not find God's favor (see the discussion on James 1:26-27). Although a believer will never completely cease from sin while alive on this earth, his values should be the same as those of the Kingdom. His desire should be to be pure.

According to Jesus the pure in heart will be blessed by seeing God (Matt. 5:8). Although this isn't ultimately true until the Kingdom comes, it is true to some degree now since our perception of God and His ways corresponds to our personal purity.

**Peaceable:** Heavenly wisdom values peace with others and helps them to find peace with God. It desires to make peace and to promote peace in the church. Earthly wisdom displays itself in jealousy and factions, while

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peacemaking lessens tensions and seeks solutions to problems through wise council.

**Gentle:** Gentleness is "being willing to waive all rigor and severity in its dealing with others" (Hiebert, 235). Someone who is gentle is considerate of the feelings of others. They are kind in dealing with people. The opposite is pictured by Jesus in Matthew 18:24-30 in the story of the servant who was forgiven much but responded to his fellow servant with incredible severity.

**Reasonable:** The word translated as "reasonable" appears only here in the NT. Etymologically it suggests the meaning of "easily-persuaded" (Hiebert, 235). A person who has wisdom is open to new ideas. He is willing to listen to other peoples' opinions and insights and seriously consider what they have to say. He is willing to cooperate. The opposite of "reasonable" is to be obstinate, inflexible, resistant, or unbending.

**Full of mercy:** Mercy and grace often have the same meaning, but when they differ, the difference is this: Grace is a loving response when love is undeserved (Carson, *Matthew*, 23). Grace deals with sin and guilt itself. Grace extends pardon. It cleanses and reinstates. (Stott, *Sermon on the Mount*, 47). Mercy is a loving response to someone who is in misery or helpless (Carson, *Matthew*, 24). It is compassion for those in need. It deals with what we see of pain, misery, and distress [the results of sin]. Mercy extends relief. It cures and heals. It prefers to treat people in terms of what they need than by what they deserve. The world when it runs true to its nature is unmerciful but so is the church when it's acting out of worldliness. The world prefers to insulate itself from the calamities of men. It finds revenge fulfilling and forgiveness difficult. (Stott, *Sermon on the Mount*, 47).

Mercy is an attribute of God (Psa. 86:5; 100:5; 103:8; Eph. 2:4) and is an attribute that He values in others (Hos. 6:6; Mic. 6:8; Matt. 23:23; Lk. 10:37). To be "full" of mercy means that the person who possesses wisdom has mercy in abundance. It overflows, it floods their life and actions, it super abounds in relations with others.

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**Full of good fruits:** A wise person also has an abundance of good fruits (cf. Gal. 5:22-23).

**Unwavering:** The Greek word "unwavering" is formed off of the word "divided" with a negative prefix added to it. Therefore, it means "undivided." Wisdom acts consistently.

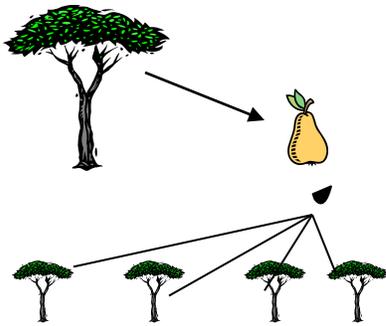
**Without hypocrisy:** Lastly, wisdom is not hypocritical. Wisdom does not wear a mask for it has nothing to hide. It does not say one thing and do another or behave differently in different circumstances or when around different people.

**3:18 And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.**

Literally, the Greek reads, "and the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace." "Fruit of righteousness" can be interpreted in two different ways; either it could mean <sup>(1)</sup> the fruit which is righteousness (genitive of apposition), or <sup>(2)</sup> the fruit that righteousness produces (subjective genitive) "is sown in peace by those who make peace." Either interpretation is grammatically possible; however, the second view is probably preferred. Isaiah 32:17 sets forth a similar relationship between righteousness and peace: "And the work of righteousness will be peace, And the service of righteousness, quietness and confidence forever." It is also similar in structure to Luke 3:8 (fruits worthy of repentance; i.e. fruits that produce repentance) and Galatians 5:22 (the fruit of the Spirit - i.e. fruit that the Spirit produces). "Under the former view, the righteousness that characterizes the godly life is itself the fruit that is sown. Under the latter view, the fruit that righteousness produces contains in itself seed that, when planted, produces a harvest of similar kind" (Hiebert, 237). The resultant meaning is the same in both cases. Earthly wisdom produces a harvest of disorder and every evil thing (3:16). Heavenly wisdom produces a harvest of righteousness.

Verse 18 can be visualized as follows:

Righteousness produces fruit.



A seed produces after "its kind" (Gen. 1:11). In this case it's a seed of righteousness so it develops into righteousness.

The soil that is conducive to the growth of the seed of righteousness is peace. James says that "the seed is sown in peace by those who make peace." In other words, he is saying that those who love peace will spread righteousness in an environment of peace and will see righteousness multiply. This is characteristic of the person that possesses wisdom.