

Week 7: Taming the Tongue

The Place of the Passage

In the last passage, James laid out the theological and biblical case for his main point—that a living, genuine faith will lead to a life of obedience. For the rest of the book now, James will consider several areas of his readers’ lives where obedience is necessary. The issues he addresses seem to have been particular struggles for his readers. In [James 3:1–18](#), the author considers how his readers are using their tongues to tear one another down with strife and backbiting. Instead of doing that, he says, they ought to be people of meekness and wisdom. That is what Christian obedience would demand.

The Big Picture

Christians should be careful not to let their tongues cause strife and quarrels, but rather use them in wisdom to make peace in the church.

Reflection and Discussion

Read through the complete passage for this study, [James 3:1–18](#). Then review the listed passages and write your own notes on the following questions. (For further background, see the ESV Study Bible, pages 2395–2396, available online at www.esvbible.org.)

The Trouble with the Tongue ([James 3:1–12](#))

The main topic of this passage is the evil of the tongue. Why do you think James starts the section with the exhortation that “not many of you should become teachers”? (Hint: if a lot of sinful people are aspiring to the same position in the church, what can be the result?)

Read [James 3:2](#). What does James think would be the hardest area of life in which to avoid stumbling?

In [James 3:3–5](#), James uses three examples to explain the power of the tongue, despite its physical smallness. What are the three examples? Explain James’s point in your own words.

[James 3:6–12](#) contain some of the most blistering language in the New Testament, which James directs against the tongue. What phrases does James use in [James 3:6](#) to describe the tongue’s evil? Write out each phrase in the verse, and explain what each means. (Use the note on [James 3:5–6](#) in the ESV Study Bible for help.)

What is the contrast James draws in [James 3:7–8](#)? What is he communicating about the tongue?

In [James 3:9–12](#), James points out a fundamental tension in our use of the tongue. The tongue does two things at once—blessing and cursing! What three examples does James use in [James 3:11–12](#) to show the absurdity and sinfulness of using the same tongue to bless God and curse people?

Do you think the tongue deserves everything James is ascribing to it here? Does it really cause that much trouble? Why do you give that answer?

The Solution: Wisdom from Above ([James 3:13–18](#))

If the tongue is so dangerous, what should we do about it? James has already said in [James 1:26](#) that obedience to the word of God requires us to bridle the tongue. His point seems to be similar here. Instead of being driven by the evil of the tongue, we should be marked by “the meekness of wisdom.” Can you find places in [James 3:1–12](#) that show how the tongue can be marked by pride instead of meekness?

Why would somebody boast about having bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in their heart? Why would they confuse those things with “the wisdom that comes down from above” ([James 3:15](#))? (Hint: if your heart is filled with bitter jealousy, you probably don’t recognize it as such; you probably call it “a desire for fairness” and insist on the wisdom of your position!)

Explain how a church full of jealousy and selfish ambition can collapse into disorder and vileness ([James 3:16](#)).

Read [James 3:17–18](#) and notice all the words James uses to describe a person marked by wisdom from above. How are those things opposed to bitter jealousy and selfish ambition?

Read through the following three sections on Gospel Glimpses, Whole-Bible Connections, and Theological Soundings. Then take time to reflect on the Personal Implications these sections may have for your walk with the Lord.

Meekness: Humble assurance under all circumstances, founded on a deep trust in God’s will and providence ([Ps. 37:11](#)). Such trust results in a peaceful and gentle disposition even in the face of persecution or difficulty. It frees a person from the temptations of self-reliance and pride.

Gospel Glimpses

WE BLESS OUR LORD AND FATHER. Overarching all of James’s ethical exhortations is the reality that we as Christians are in relationship with God, our Lord and Father. That is the fundamental reality of a Christian’s life, and it shapes everything he or she does, says, and thinks.

FULL OF MERCY. The wisdom from above, James says, is, among other things, “full of mercy” ([James 3:17](#)). The wise man or woman is not reluctant to extend mercy to another, but eager. For those who know the wisdom from above are the very ones who have been granted mercy in Christ. God, in Jesus, was “full of mercy” toward us. We have the glad privilege of extending that mercy accordingly to others.

Whole-Bible Connections

THE TONGUE AND WISDOM. How we use our tongue is an important theme in Old Testament Wisdom Literature, and James draws from that wealth of knowledge in this section. In [Psalm 120:2–4](#), the psalmist prays, “Deliver me, O Lord, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue. What shall be given to you, and what more shall be done to you, you deceitful tongue? A warrior’s sharp arrows, with glowing coals of the broom tree!” (see also [Prov. 16:27](#)). Our tendency to use our tongue for evil is one of the most important pieces of evidence the Bible uses to show us our sinfulness and our need for a Savior. In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus

says, “But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire” ([Matt. 5:22](#)). In his famous collection of Old Testament verses showing our sinfulness, Paul also uses the tongue as evidence of our sinfulness: “Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.” “The venom of asps is under their lips.” “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness” ([Rom. 3:13–14](#)).

THE MEEKNESS OF WISDOM. Meekness and humility are terms frequently used to describe a person of wisdom ([Prov. 18:12; 22:4](#)). That is because wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord ([Prov. 1:7](#)), which requires a willingness to submit to instruction and teaching and to obey the Lord’s word. Pride does not desire to submit to any such thing, and therefore it prevents one from becoming wise. All of that is a distinctively biblical teaching. The Greeks did not consider meekness to be a virtue at all. It was Jesus, drawing on Old Testament teaching, who made meekness a cardinal virtue of a Christian ([Matt. 5:5; 11:29](#)).

Theological Soundings

THE IMAGE OF GOD. The Bible teaches that all of us are created in God’s image and likeness. In [Genesis 1:26](#), God says that he is going to make man “in our image, after our likeness.” Some Christians have argued, on the basis of [Genesis 5:3](#), that it was only Adam who was made in God’s likeness, and all his descendants are made in Adam’s likeness, not God’s. This understanding is proved to be mistaken by [James 3:9](#). All people are made in the likeness of God, although none naturally behave in a godlike way. One implication of this creational godlikeness is that humanity has been given the capacity for language. Let us use the tongue, therefore, in a way that honors others, who are equally created in God’s image.

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of [James 3:1–18](#) for your own life today. Note the personal implications for your walk with the Lord in light of (1) the Gospel Glimpses, (2) the Whole-Bible Connections, (3) the Theological Soundings, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses
2. Whole-Bible Connections
3. Theological Soundings
4. [James 3:1–18](#)

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord’s blessing and help as you engage in this study of James. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on a few key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and to take note of things to review again in the future.