

# **JAS. 3:1 – 5:6**

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## IV. Caution about role of teacher in light of error (3:1-5a)

### A. Stricter judgment and potential for error (3:1-2)

1. The existence of the error that mere mental assent to the truths of Christ is sufficient for salvation prompts James to issue a caution regarding teachers. He says that not many of them should become teachers, and the reason he gives is that teachers will receive a stricter (or greater) judgment. Moo remarks:

Teachers, because they bear so much responsibility for the spiritual welfare of those to whom they minister, will be scrutinized by the Lord more carefully than others. Jesus warned: "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Luke 12:48). God has given to teachers a great gift and entrusted to them "the deposit" of the faith (cf. 2 Tim. 1:14). He will expect a careful account of the stewardship. Paul reflects just this sense of responsibility as he addresses the elders of the church at Ephesus. He stressed that he had been faithful to his task as a herald of the gospel: "I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God" (Acts 20:26-27).

2. The reason this stricter judgment should cause them to think twice about becoming teachers is that, of all the ways we humans stumble, sinning in speech is among the easiest. The potential for sinning in speech is so great that if one could keep the tongue in check so as not to sin with it one could bring anything under control. In that case, you would've "arrived"; you'd be complete or perfect or fully mature. So stricter judgment, combined with the potential for stumbling that exists when you're running your mouth (as a teacher does), means that careful consideration is required before becoming a teacher.

3. In saying that not many of them should become teachers, James is referring to their present state of spiritual immaturity. Not many of them were ready to be teachers. In Heb. 5:12, the writer rebukes the immature for not progressing in faith so as to be able to teach. They're addressing immaturity from different directions. James says, in essence, you're too immature to be teaching; the Hebrew writer says you shouldn't be so immature.

### B. Great effect of teaching on church (3:3-5a)

1. Caution is needed in becoming a teacher not only because the teacher faces a stricter judgment and a significant risk of stumbling but also because teaching has a great influence on the direction of the church, the local body of Christ. Just as a small bit directs a horse and a small rudder directs a ship, so the small tongue directs the community's spiritual course. The tongue indeed can boast of tremendous effects.

2. Exhibit "A" is the claim James had heard was circulating that works are of no significance in the Christian's life. If that were taught to Christians as the truth of God, the effect on the congregation would be catastrophic. Christians would become casual about sin and thus would be condemned.

#### V. Call to harmony among believers (3:5b - 4:12)

##### A. Cursing (3:5b-12)

1. James uses his reference to the tongue's influence to turn the discussion to the division among his readers. It seems that the division was, at least to some extent, stimulated by their oppression. Jas. 5:9 puts their grumbling against one another in this context.

2. The tongue is not only influential, it also is very destructive. A little fire can wind up burning down a great forest, and the tongue is a fire.

3. Contrary to pure and undefiled religion, which requires one to keep oneself unspotted by the world (1:27), the tongue stains the entire person and wreaks havoc throughout one's life. Jesus taught in Mat. 15:11, 18-19 that what comes out of a person's mouth is what makes him "unclean." In elaborating, he noted that the mouth expresses the heart, in which are found evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, and slander.

4. In saying that the tongue "is set on fire by hell" (3:6b), I think James is saying that the sinful speech ultimately leads to judgment, where the tongue, along with the entire person, experiences the fire of hell. He may, however, be saying that the tongue derives its destructive power, its fire, from Satan, the one who is most intimately associated with hell. In other words, he's the one exploiting this avenue of sinfulness.

5. In vv. 7-8 James reminds us that the tongue is extremely difficult to bring under control.

a. Mankind's prowess in taming things is evident in its taming of all kinds of creatures, but no man can thoroughly subdue the tongue. It is a restless evil in the sense it just won't quit. Just when you think you've mastered it, you'll find yourself lying or boasting or flattering or gossiping or slandering or abusing or cursing or speaking obscenely.

b. Regarding James's statement that no man is able to tame the tongue, Moo writes:

[D]oes James and/or the NT as a whole envisage the possibility of Christians attaining perfection in this life? We have answered this question in the negative . . . James does, indeed, suggest that the ultimate taming of the tongue is impossible. Should this lead us to abandon all efforts to bring our speech under control? Of course not. The realization that perfection is unattainable should not dampen in the least our enthusiasm to become as good as it is possible. We may never reach the point where the tongue is perfectly controlled; but we can surely advance a long way in using our speech to glorify God.

6. In the case of James's addressees, some were using the tongue to curse others. James does not specify in 3:9-12 that the cursing was being directed at other Christians, but there clearly were conflicts and quarrels among members of the community (4:1), they clearly were speaking against one another (4:11), and they clearly were grumbling against one another (5:9).

a. Perhaps the financial pressure brought on by economic oppression caused some to become stingy and to love the world in the sense of focusing unduly on how to gain more financial security. This may have caused complaining, bitterness, and divisions within the community. The warning about grumbling against one another is given in the context of exhorting them to patience in the face of suffering.

b. I think that in 3:6-12 James has begun addressing the disharmony among his readers, which topic occupies him through 4:12. Now, what he says about cursing would apply to cursing non-Christians, who also are made in the image of God, but I think his focus is on their cursing each other.

7. "Cursing" is not simply abusive language; it is, in the sense James means, calling in anger for God to cut a person off from any possible blessing and to consign that person to hell. More generally, it is calling, from ill will, for harm to befall another (e.g., "I wish you would die").

a. Christians are to bless those who curse them (Lk. 6:28; Rom. 12:14; 1 Cor. 4:12), but that apparently doesn't mean that cursing always is wrong. Paul, for example, used curselike formulas (e.g., 1 Corinthians 16:22; Gal. 1:8-9). So, as with the prohibition against anger, it seems it is sinful to call for divine judgment out of a sense of personal affront but not sinful to do so for the vindication of God's glory and purpose.

b. Peter Davids puts it this way:

In the NT one finds the words of Jesus forbidding cursing (Lk. 6:28), as well as those of Paul (Rom. 12:14), but apparently such

prohibitions were not interpreted as absolute in all circumstances, for Paul certainly expressed at least curselike formulas . . . and Jude, to name another example, is virtually a long curse pronouncement on certain teachers. What James appears to be referring to is the use of a curse in anger, especially in inner-church party strife . . .

8. James says that such cursing is incompatible with the nature of a Christian. It is totally out of place to pour forth from our mouths the fresh water of praise to God and then later, from the same mouth, to pour forth the bitter water of cursing. Natural springs don't alternate that way. It is as contrary to the Christian's nature to curse others as it would be for a fig tree to produce olives, a grapevine to produce figs, or a salt spring to produce fresh water.

#### B. Envy and rivalry (3:13-18)

1. Continuing his instruction regarding sins of division, James warns his readers about envy and rivalry. Apparently envy and rivalry were being cloaked with a claim of wisdom. In other words, it seems that envy and rivalry were being spun as appropriate exercises of wisdom.

2. James says that those who are wise and understanding of the things of God will exhibit that wisdom in humble behavior. But those with envy and rivalry in their hearts have no business boasting of being wise. In doing so, they contradict the truth that wisdom breeds humility.

3. Whatever wisdom they have, it is not from above; it is demonic. Its demonic origin is shown by the fact envy and rivalry (born of their "wisdom") produce disorder and every evil practice.

4. Those possessing true wisdom are:

a. first and foremost, pure - Unadulterated in their pursuit of the things of God; they are not double-minded.

b. peaceable, gentle, compliant - They make peace because they are gentle and compliant (or deferential). They are not combative but willing to "go along" when unalterable principles are not involved. Paul is a good example (1 Cor. 9:22 - "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some").

c. full of mercy and good fruits, impartial - They exhibit mercy, kindness, and honor without prejudice to their neighbors (unlike how they had treated the poor man in 2:13). This produces unity and goodwill.

d. sincere - They are genuine, acting without show or pretense.

5. Those who are peacemakers are thereby sowing a crop of righteousness because an environment of peace is conducive to righteousness (as envy and rivalry are conducive to "every evil practice").

C. Conflicts and quarrels (4:1-3)

1. As Moo states, "The quarrels of James's day have too often marred the Christian church."

a. The 17<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish philosopher Spinoza observed:

I have often wondered that persons who make boast of professing the Christian religion – namely love, joy, peace, temperance, and charity to all men – should quarrel with such rancorous animosity and display daily towards one another such bitter hatred, that this, rather than the virtues which they profess, is the readiest criteria of their faith.

b. The January 2006 issue of the *Christian Chronicle* had an interview with Kevin Bethea, a Pentecostal preacher who resigned his ordination after becoming convinced that the beliefs of those in churches of Christ are more in line with the Scriptures. In December 1995 he planted the East Baltimore Church of Christ, which has grown from 35 to 325 members.

(1) The interviewer asked, "What happened when you turned in your Church of God licenses and credentials to the bishop?" Bethea answered: "I told him I was leaving. He said, 'You don't want to go over there to those people.' I said, 'Why?' He said, 'You don't know about those church of Christ people. They fight about everything. They'll fight about the color of the drapes.'"

(2) That's not good. Even when a battle must be fought, that must be done without sacrificing Christian principles and virtues.

2. The conflicts and quarrels occurring among James's readers are rooted in the envy and jealousy that springs from frustrated desires (4:1-2b). Because they don't have what they want, they hate and are filled with jealousy, which leads to quarrelling and fighting.

a. James literally says in v.2a, "You want and do not have, so *you kill* and are filled with jealousy." This raises the question of whether the hostility within the church had reached the point that they literally had committed murder.

b. Some think that is the case, but I suspect James is drawing on the teaching of Jesus in equating sinful anger with murder (Mat. 5:21-26). If this teaching were well known, that would explain why James didn't need to indicate that his use was nonliteral. Or perhaps referred to their current fighting and jealousy as "killing" because, if unchecked, that is what it leads to (a hypothetical eventuality).

c. I think either of these possibilities is more likely than believing that James would pass so quickly over such a serious matter in the church as murder.

3. To the extent their frustrated desires are for things needed to serve and glorify God, they do not have because they do not ask God to provide them (4:2c).

4. To the extent their frustrated desires are for things to indulge their pleasures, they do not have, despite asking God for them, because God does not honor such selfishly motivated requests (4:3). Moo comments:

Jesus had promised, "Ask and it will be given to you (Matt. 7:7). But clearly Jesus had in mind that asking which has as its focus and motive God's name, God's kingdom, and God's will (Matt. 6:9-10) – not an asking that had the purpose of the indulgence of those 'pleasures' (*hēdonai*) that are at war with our souls (cf. v. 1).

#### D. Call to submit to God (4:4-10)

1. In 4:4-10 James issues a clear call to repent of all such sin. "Adulteresses" is an O.T. allusion to unfaithful people of God. His readers had embraced the hostility and divisiveness of the world, thereby being unfaithful to God, and seemingly were oblivious to their spiritual infidelity. This is consistent with the moral blind spot I suggested they had with regard to their sins of anger and evil speech in 1:19-27.

2. He tells them plainly that whoever decides to befriend the world has been made an enemy of God. Scripture does not speak in vain when it says God is a jealous God (e.g., Ex. 20:5, 34:14; Zech. 8:2). He tolerates no adultery!

a. "Friendship" in the Greco-Roman world was much stronger than our sense of the word. We speak casually of "friends," but in that world there was an essential equality and unity of friends. Ancient writers said that friends are "one soul," that they "share all things in common," that they "saw things the same way," and that a friend is "another self" (Johnson, 243-244).

b. That puts Jn. 15:14-15 in a new light: "You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you."

c. Moo writes:

We have no evidence that James's readers were overtly disclaiming God and consciously deciding to follow the world instead. But their tendency to imitate the world by discriminating against people (2:1-13),

by speaking negatively of others (3:1-12), by exhibiting "bitter envy" and "selfish ambition" (3:13-18), and by pursuing their own destructive pleasures (4:1-3) amounted to just that. James, as it were, wants to raise the stakes so that his readers see their compromising conduct for what it really is. God tolerates no rival. When believers behave in a worldly manner, that demonstrates that, at that point, their allegiance is to the world rather than to God.

3. I follow Adamson and Laws in understanding *pneuma* as the subject of 4:5b and in identifying it with the human spirit. So, in my view, James is saying that despite their (characteristically human) affair with the world through envy and its related evils – our spirits gravitate toward the world, i.e., long enviously – God is willing and able to provide grace sufficient to overcome that sinfulness.

4. Because of the availability of this overcoming grace, Scripture (Prov. 3:34, esp. LXX) says "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Humility before God is the condition for receiving this grace. As David wrote in Ps. 51:16-17:

You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;  
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.  
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart,  
O God, you will not despise.

5. They must shake off the self-righteousness engendered in part by their perceived superiority to their oppressors and humble themselves before the Lord. Through repentance they will receive exaltation by God's grace.

#### E. Command not to slander (4:11-12)

1. As fruit of that humbling, they must cease speaking against one another.

2. To put down a brother or sister for personal reasons is to criticize and judge the royal law (see, 2:8; note "neighbor" in 4:12) which forbids such things. Those who sit in judgment of the law are not doing the law, not submitting to it, but putting themselves above it as judges.

3. God is the only legitimate lawgiver and judge. They have no business usurping his role as judge. (Note: that is all our society wants to do!)

#### VI. Criticism of the wealthy (4:13 - 5:6)

##### A. Rebuke of believers neglecting poor believers (4:13-17)

1. In 4:13-17 James addresses those wealthy believers who, as demonstrated by the certainty with which they spoke of their business plans, lived under the

belief they were guaranteed tomorrow. Proverbs 27:1 warns: "Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth."

a. That these merchants are Christians is indicated by the fact James chastises them for failing to look at life from a Christian perspective (v. 14), urges them to acknowledge the Lord's sovereignty and providence as they make their plans (v. 15), and suggests that they know what they ought to do in this matter (v. 17). James would hardly address non-Christians this way.

b. That those addressed here probably are Christians is recognized by Davids, Moo, and Burdick.

2. He exposes this attitude as an arrogant delusion. The fact of the matter is that their future is in the hands of the Lord, and to boast as though the future is in our hands is evil. As Moo remarks:

This world is not a closed system; what appears to our senses to be the totality of existence is in fact only part of the whole. This life cannot properly be understood without considering the spiritual realm, a realm that impinges on and ultimately determines the material realm in which we live day to day.

3. The connection of v. 17 is not obvious, but I think Sophie Laws is onto something. Given the fact tomorrow is in the hands of the Lord and the fact they do not know his plans, they cannot justify not acting today on the basis that they'll act tomorrow. They have no excuse for putting off till tomorrow doing the good they knew to do (i.e., helping their poorer brothers). This may seem like a stretch, but that concept is present in Prov. 3:27-28, especially in the LXX of that text.

a. Prov. 3:27-28 states: "Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act. Do not say to your neighbor, 'Come back later; I'll give it tomorrow' - when you now have it with you." The LXX adds "for you do not know what the next day will bring."

b. James already appealed to Prov. 3:34 in 4:6.

## B. Fate of unbelievers oppressing poor believers (5:1-6)

1. In 5:1-6 he announces the fate of the unbelievers who are oppressing the poor believers. He does this so that the faithful, hearing the miserable end of the rich, might not envy their wealth and so that they may gain strength to endure in knowing that God would avenge the wrongs done to them.

2. These people love money so much that they are willing to abuse, exploit and even "kill" God's people to obtain and preserve it.

a. James's use of the word "condemned" in v. 6 points to some kind of judicial verdict, which suggests (again) that they were using their wealth and influence to deprive the righteous poor of their rights and of their living.

b. The practical outcome of cheating the poor out of their land and taking away their gainful employment was that they'd starve to death (hence the reference that they "murder" or "kill" the righteous man). As said in the Jewish writing Ecclesiasticus (a.k.a. The Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach), which was written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C., "To take away a neighbor's living is to murder him; to deprive an employee of his wages is to shed blood."

3. They have made a fool's choice. Though they enjoyed luxury for a time, the material things to which they devoted themselves will not last. The temporality of these goods, depicted by their rust, will testify to the foolishness of their choice. In the end, their idolatry will bring God's wrath upon them (the rust of their goods will consume even them).

4. See, 1 Tim. 6:6-10 - Love of money is a spiritual death trap. Groups that promote the love of money, that make the pursuit of wealth the center of a person's life, are evil. The love of money cannot be justified or sanctified by the claim that money lovers have more to use for God. See also, Mat. 6:24.

5. See, 1 Tim. 6:17-19 - Wealth is fine if kept in the proper perspective. Wealth is to be used for the glory of God.

6. The fate of these wealthy oppressors is revealed as an encouragement to those being oppressed. Faithfulness to God doesn't always appear in this life to be the wisest move. They were suffering whereas the impudent were living high. But their choice will be vindicated! See, e.g., Mat. 25:31-46.