

The Treachery of the Tongue (Part 1 of # 13)

James 3: 1-12

As we move into Chapter 3 of our study, James continues to challenge believers in their walk with the Lord. He knew the significance of the faith and he earnestly desired the church to represent the Lord well in every aspect of life. In our previous study he admonished them regarding professing their faith while showing partiality among men, showing favoritism to some and shunning others.

James also knew the importance and influence of those who taught the Word of God. He was aware they not only had a great responsibility to rightly discern the Word, but also to communicate in such a way as to reach others rather than turn them away from the faith. Our opening verses deal with those who teach the Word, and then we come to the great discourse on the tongue. In reality these two go hand in hand. We communicate with words, and we must be cautious as we speak.

I am convinced this passage needs to be taught and preached often among the church. Many churches are in turmoil right now due to an unruly tongue. The tongue is a powerful thing. It has the ability to build up and encourage, and it also has the ability to tear down and hurt. We remember the little phrase from our youth: Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me. Nothing could be farther from the truth. We may try to put on a strong face when hurtful words or accusations are said, but we all know the pain they bring. We have all been hurt by the words of others. Physical wounds will heal, but the emotional wounds of mean and hurtful words often never do. We must remember that words have power. They can and are used to bring hurt, but they also can and should be used to encourage.

As with our previous study, this paragraph of Scripture is too much to cover in one setting, so we will break it down into two parts. I want to begin considering the [warnings](#) revealed in the text as we contemplate: [The Treachery of the Tongue](#).

I. A Warning Concerning Teaching (1-2) – As we discussed in the introduction, James is concerned with the attitudes and methodology of those who teach the Word. He offers a warning to those who aspire to teach the Word to others. Consider:

A. The Caution (1a) – [My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.](#) I want to point out that the word translated [masters](#) in the text has the idea of teaching. It refers to “*an instructor, master, or teacher.*” It also speaks to the respect of a master or teacher due to the authority and prestige of the position. James offers a warning to all who aspire to teach the Word. It was not a position to seek for vain glory or to be entered lightly.

- Surely he had encountered those who desired to teach the Word, but their motives were impure. Some had sought such a position desiring only the recognition and prestige it afforded without counting the cost or responsibility of such an endeavor.
- In essence James warns against pride and covetousness. There is a certain amount of allure, if you will, to positions of leadership. I fear that many seek, and even enter into certain positions, based solely on the desire to possess the position rather than engage in the work it requires. Whatever we endeavor to do for Christ must be born of love and devotion for Him, not for our glory or recognition!

B. The Condemnation (1) – [My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.](#) He we discover great emphasis concerning this warning. James knew that God would hold those who taught His Word accountable for their teaching and their motives. For me this a very sobering portion of Scripture. I want to clarify that James is not speaking of the condemnation reserved for the sinner, but it does reveal the judgment of our works in teaching and leading others. The condemnation James speaks of refers to judgment, but it will be a separate judgment. Our word [condemnation](#) is translated from the Greek word *kríma*, which comes from the verb *krínō*, meaning “*to separate, or distinguish.*” It seems apparent that God will separate those who have taught His Word, holding them accountable for what they taught and how they taught. Those who hold positions of authority and influence will be called upon to bear the responsibility of their position.

- That challenges me as I study and prepare to preach and teach the Word of God. I am sure that I have been guilty of misinterpretation at times. I know that I have taught things in the past that I would never teach again, realizing my error. I never want to be guilty of opening the Word of God without due time in prayer, study, and preparation! [Luke 12:48b – For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.](#) [Mat.12:36 – But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.](#)

C. The Communication (2) – [For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.](#) James now deals with the communication of the teacher. This relates to the tongue (which we will consider in the following verses) and the teacher’s responsibility to communicate in a way that glorifies the Lord and edifies the church. Let’s take a moment to break this verse down as we consider the aspects of communication it reveals. Notice:

1. The Reality (1a) – [For in many things we offend all.](#) Here we discover a timeless truth.

Regardless of our best intentions, each of us has offended someone at some point in time. It may have been unintentional and entirely innocent, but the fact remains we all have offended others.

- James likely knew those that felt as if they had arrived spiritually and were above sin. He also probably had met those who felt as if their understanding of the Scriptures was above question and their teaching was superior to all others. He offers a slice of “humble pie” within the text. Even though we are born again in Christ, we still live within a body of flesh that is prone to sin and miss the mark. At the end of the day, regardless of our accomplishments, we remain nothing more than sinners saved by the grace of God. There is no room for boasting on our part.

- This is certainly no encouragement to sin, but it does bring a measure of comfort to our lives. God knows our weaknesses and our frailties. He knows that we are prone to stumble and miss the mark. He knew we could never achieve sinless perfection, so He sent His Son as the sacrificial atonement. We do not glory in our sin, but the man who realizes his weakness and depends upon God will be more fruitful than one who denies the truth.

2. The Restraint (2) – [For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.](#) Even though at our very best we fail and come short, that is no reason for lack of desire in doing better. We will never achieve sinless perfection, but each of us should strive to obtain it. There ought to be a desire within every believer to live as holy and righteous as they possibly can.

- James speaks of those who have learned the art of restraint. They face the same temptations and desires as other men. They have the same tendency to get angry and carry bitterness within their hearts. They deal with the same struggles the rest of us do, and yet they have learned to overcome. If a man can keep from offending others in his words, this man is perfect (spiritually mature) and able to bridle his body (literally restrain his fleshly desires.)

- This will no doubt require prayer, patience, and help from the Lord, but progress is possible. It will take longer for some of us than others, but we can reach the place spiritually that we resist the temptation of the flesh and seek the ways of God. It isn't easy to offer a kind word when you have been falsely accused or spoken evil of. It is difficult for some to refrain from gossip, but with the help of the Lord we can overcome! If the majority of Christians would work on preventing offense from an unruly tongue, you would see a miraculous difference in our churches.

- Again we need to be reminded of the direct connection of the tongue to the heart. Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaketh. The key is to have our hearts in tune with the Lord, and if we accomplish that, the words will come out right!

3. The Reputation (2) – *For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.* Does that not sound like the ideal candidate to teach the Word of God? Would this man not have the ability to influence others for the glory of God? That is not to say this man has abandoned his convictions or erred in the faith. It doesn't even reflect that he is unwilling to confront sin and wrong. He has the ability to teach the Word of God, even when it confronts, without being arrogant or demeaning in his attitude.

- Now I am well aware that those who teach or preach the Word of God without compromise will not please everyone. I know that some will be critical of even the best teachers, but those whose hearts are right with God can teach others who have a genuine desire to learn of Him without being offensive in their teaching. I would never advocate abandoning doctrine or watering down the truth, but much can be said for the way a man presents his message. It is possible to confront sin or teach biblical truth that is socially controversial within the church setting if we are prayerful in what we say and how we say it.

- We will never reach others or help them see the error of their ways with an arrogant, legalistic attitude. We must always remember that were it not for the grace of God, we too would have made shipwreck of our lives. Wisdom and compassion go hand in hand when teaching the Word of God. It is never acceptable to use the pulpit or teaching platform to promote our own agenda or humiliate others. People will listen to a man they respect, but they will turn off one who seeks to degrade and bully. (Share the experience of Sunday School early in our marriage.)

Conclusion: These two verses have dealt extensively with those who teach the Word of God. They have challenged me in the ministry I have been entrusted with. I realize that I will fail and miss the mark, but I need to strive for Christ-likeness in my life. I want to ensure that I always take the necessary time and effort to properly prepare each time I share the Word of God.

If you are in a teaching position, I trust you realize the significance of what you are engaged in. All who preach or teach the Word will give account to God for their efforts. We need to be reminded of the gravity of such endeavors. We will certainly influence others in some way. If there are areas in your life that need attention, I urge you to seek the Lord and His guidance. Particularly, if you have never been saved, seek the Lord while He is near!