



Perfect Law

CONTROLLING THE TONGUE

James 3

Teaching Notes

INTRO

The author of James was most probably the half-brother of Jesus. James wrote to the believers who had been dispersed around the known world due to the persecution that began in Jerusalem and then spread out into other areas.

In James 3 the author gave six metaphors for the tongue and about how our tongues impact those around us. Wiersbe points out that James described what it takes to be a mature Christian: “He is patient in trouble (James 1) and he practices the truth (James 2). In this section [chapter 3] . . . he has power over his tongue.”¹

TEACHING

James 3:1-8: Hebrews 5:11–14 states that all believers should be teaching. However, James wrote that not many should become teachers because they will be held under stricter judgment (v. 1) if they communicate God’s truth but do not live it out in their lives (v. 2; 1 John 2:20, 27). MacArthur states that this stricter judgment “refers to a future judgment: (1) for the unbelieving false teacher, at the Second Coming (Jude 14,15); and (2) for the believer, when he is rewarded before Christ (1 Corinthians 4:3–5).”² This stricter judgment is not meant to discourage those who are called to teach but rather to warn potential teachers of the significance of the call.³ MacArthur defines the word stumble as “sinning or offending God’s person.”⁴

James emphasized that those teachers who were hypocritical in their teachings and lives—teaching one thing but doing another—would be held in judgment. The requirement is to keep the entire body under control (v. 2b). Scripture contains much about the evil the tongue can cause (Psalm 5:9; 34:13; 39:1; 52:4; Proverbs 26:28; 28:23). MacArthur states, “The tongue has immense power to speak sinfully, erroneously, and inappropriately.”⁵

Wiersbe explains that the tongue has the “Power to Direct.”⁶ Verses 3–5 give illustrations: the bit in the mouth of a horse guides the whole animal (v. 3); the small rudder guides a large ship, even against fierce winds (v. 4); and a small fire can spread across an entire forest (v. 5). The tongue is also a small thing that has the “Power to Destroy.”⁷

Wiersbe used the example of the Great Chicago Fire in 1871. A fire that started in the O’Leary barn spread across Chicago, leaving 100,000 people homeless, 17,500 buildings destroyed, 300 people dead, and over \$400,000,000 in damages.⁸ The tongue is also a fire and can pollute the whole body. It also “is set on fire by hell” (v. 6) (Proverbs 26:20–21). MacArthur explains the word hell is from the Greek word Gehenna (the valley of Hinnom). “In Christ’s time, this valley that lay southwest of Jerusalem’s walls served as the city dump and was known for its constantly burning fire. Jesus used that place to symbolize the eternal place of punishment and torment (Mark 9:43, 45).”⁹ This means that if your tongue controls your body, the evil of your tongue will send you on a different path from what God had planned for you. This also suggests that without control of the tongue, we have given control over to the enemy. This leads into the next illustration—man has learned to control every creature on the planet except for his own tongue, which is evil and full of poison (v. 7–8).

James 3:9–12: Wiersbe states the tongue has the “Power to Delight.”¹⁰ We praise the Lord with our tongues, and then curse people who are made in God’s likeness (v. 9); praising and cursing comes out of the same mouth (v. 10). James used the image of a spring that can only give one kind of water, either sweet or bitter, but not both (v. 11). He also used the picture of how a fig tree can only produce figs and is incapable of producing olives (v. 12). This ties back to James 2—what we believe is what should be seen and heard from us.

Think of how we could impact others by having one goal each day—to speak Christ and life into others.

¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Exposition Bible Commentary* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1989), p. 357.

² John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2005), p. 1889.

³ MacArthur, p. 1889.

⁴ MacArthur, p. 1889.

⁵ MacArthur, p. 1889.

⁶ Wiersbe, p. 358.

⁷ Wiersbe, p. 359.

⁸ Wiersbe, p. 339.

⁹ MacArthur, p. 1889.

¹⁰ Wiersbe, p. 360.



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James 3:13–26: James moved on to having wisdom on a daily basis (v. 13). How bitter envy and selfish ambition is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic (v. 14–15), “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peace-loving, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits” (v. 16–17). All of it comes from Him—the fruit of righteousness—and we become the carriers of peace (v. 18).

CLOSING

When we have faith in Him, we will walk it out. We will look like Him and walk like Him.