

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## The Epistle of James: James 3:1-4:10

I well remember that, as a boy, when other children would say nasty things about me, I would chant the well-known rhyme,

*Sticks and stones may break my bones  
But names will never hurt me.*

That was often an act of bravado because, underneath, it really did hurt. Children, and adults, can be so cruel to each other at times! But, besides giving pain, the words we say can also bring joy. You may remember that magical moment when your spouse to be first whispered those words, "I love you"! As we continue our studies in this very practical book of James this morning, we shall see that he has some very important things to say about these tongues of ours.

So that we can cover this book of James in four broadcasts, our study today will take us from James 3:1-4:10. That's a lot of ground to cover and we shall have to move quickly. We will deal with it in three sections:

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|----------------------------|---------------|
| 1. Trouble with the tongue | James 3:1-12  |
| 2. Winning with wisdom     | James 3:12-18 |
| 3. Defeating the devil.    | James 4:1-10  |

### Trouble with the tongue (James 3:1-12)

James begins with a warning to those who teach the word of God. That's a very great privilege but also an awesome responsibility. Preachers above all must practise what they preach! James recognises, however, that we all fail, and adds, "For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect [or 'mature'] man, able also to bridle the whole body" (James 3:2).

This James, we believe, was one of the half-brothers of the Lord Jesus, born to Joseph and Mary after the Lord's miraculous virgin birth. He hadn't always been an ardent follower of the Lord Jesus. How often he must have regretted those words we read of in Mark 3:21: "When [Jesus'] family heard about this, they went to take charge of Him, for they said, 'He is out of His mind'". What cruel words! Perhaps it was seeing the Lord on the cross which brought about James' conversion. Certainly Luke tells us that, after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, His disciples met together in an upper room in Jerusalem. Luke adds, "These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, *and with His brothers*" (Acts 1:14). After this, James rose to a position of some prominence in the early church. When difficulties about the Law and circumcision threatened to split that early church into two - a Jewish church and a Gentile church - a conference was called in Jerusalem (Acts 15:6-21). After the issues had been debated, it was James who summed up the situation. Luke tells us: "And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, 'Men and brethren, listen to me: Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name ... Known to God from eternity are all His works. Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God...' (see Acts 15:13-21). What powerful, healing words were those! So James writes out of firsthand experience of the power of the tongue - for evil or for good.

James gives two illustrations of the power of small things.

Firstly of the bit, that bar of steel only a few inches long, by which the rider controls a powerful horse, urging it in the right direction.

Secondly, of the ship's rudder, tiny in comparison with the enormous size of the ship and hidden away under the sea, yet directing that giant liner in the direction the captain chooses.

He then adds these telling words, "Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it

defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so" (James 3:5-10).

James' words are so plain and pointed. They scarcely need further comment. All of us, sadly, recognise the truth of them in our own lives. Winston Churchill, a master with words, is reported as saying, "The power of man has grown in every sphere except over himself". Those words are particularly true in the sphere of the tongue. Moses, the meekest man in all the earth as Scripture describes him (Numbers 12:3), in an unguarded moment, "spoke rashly with his lips" (Psalm 106:33). That moment of anger lost Moses his place in the Promised Land!

"No man can tame the tongue", James has said (James 3:8). But what man cannot do, God can! So Jesus could say, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26). When a deaf mute was brought to Jesus, Jesus touched his tongue and said, "Be opened". So Mark tells us, "His tongue was loosed, and he spoke plainly". No doubt his voice was joined with the others who said of the Lord Jesus, "He has done all things well" (Mark 7:31-37). What the Lord Jesus did for that man in a physical sense, He is able to do for us today in loosening our tongues from bad ways so that we might become mouthpieces for Him.

James goes on to describe the tongue as being full of deadly poison. This is no overstatement! How many friendships have been poisoned, how many reputations ruined by one small careless word! We might smile at the children's rhyme but it has a serious message:

*"I lost a very little word, only the other day;  
It was a very naughty word I had not meant to say.  
But, then, it was not really lost - when from my lips it flew,  
My little brother picked it up, and now he says it too!"*

Let us resolve this morning to make David's prayer our own: "Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips" (Psalm 141:3). Or, in the words of Frances Ridley Havergal,

*"Take my voice, and let me sing  
Always, only, for my King;  
Take my lips, and let them be  
Filled with messages from Thee."*

Let our Pattern in this, as in every department of life, be the Lord Jesus Himself. When He spoke in the synagogue at Nazareth, where He had been brought up, we read, "So all bore witness to Him, and marvelled at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth" (Luke 4:22).

### **Winning with wisdom (James 3:13-18)**

In this small but important section, the ever practical James emphasises the importance of good conduct, characterised by wisdom. It will not lead to "bitter envy and self-seeking" (James 3:14). That kind of behaviour springs from another wisdom, of which James solemnly declares, "This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing will be there" (James 3:15-16). Let's be on our guard! More than ever today, the devil is looking for those through whom he can work his evil designs in this world (See 1 Peter 5:7). He knows that his time is short - the Lord Jesus is coming soon to take His Church home to heaven to be with Himself for ever. Let none of us, knowingly or unknowingly, be found doing the devil's work.

Then, as James turns from this sad picture of demonic wisdom, the picture is transformed, as so often happens in Scripture, by that little word 'but'. James writes, "But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace" (James 3:17-18). Here, like the nine-fold fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) are seven characteristics of the wisdom from above. It is worth looking at each of these in turn.

*Pure.* Today, more than ever, we are besieged by the media presenting their messages of impurity. Our newspapers, television soaps, billboards lining our streets - all these proclaim a lifestyle that is contrary to biblical teaching. We need that pure wisdom from above.

*Peaceable.* "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men", writes Paul (Romans 12:18). We need to pray, "Lord, make me a channel of Your peace". It is said that Cardinal Newman once had to say to Pusey, "You have discharged your olive branch from a catapult"! That's certainly not the way to do it!

*Gentle.* Are we ready to make allowances for others - strict with our own failings and weaknesses but gentle as to others'. Alas! Too often it is the other way round!

*Willing to yield.* It is all too easy for me to think that my views and opinions are the only right ones. Am I ready to listen to, and accept, the views of others, saying to myself, "I might be wrong"? So Paul could write, "Let your sweet reasonableness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand" (Philippians 4:5).

*Full of mercy and good fruits.* It has been said that while grace gives us what we did not deserve, mercy spares us from what we do deserve. This wisdom will never seek to get its own back for some wrong suffered, imaginary or real. We read in Titus 3:8: "...those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable to men." Only this wisdom from above will enable me to be a good neighbour, to be a good friend, to be a good listener, to be full of good fruits.

*Without partiality.* What strong words James had to say in chapter 2 against those in the church who would welcome the rich man with his gold rings and fine apparel but scarcely find room for the poor man in filthy clothes! He concludes, "If you show partiality, you commit sin" (James 2:1-10). Plain speaking indeed! Yet how easy it is to be affected by what is merely outward and superficial!

*Without hypocrisy.* Some of the harshest words uttered by the Lord Jesus were spoken against the Pharisees for their hypocrisy (see Matthew 23). He likens them to "whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness" (Matthew 23:27). By contrast, He was totally transparent, totally real, totally true.

Don't you long for that wisdom from above? It would be heaven on earth if we were all characterised by it. But how do we obtain it? James himself has already provided the answer: "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given unto him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting" (James 1:5 and 6). Lord, evermore give us this wisdom!

### **Defeating the devil (James 4:1-10)**

Wars, fights, lusts, murder, coveting - in these sorry terms does James describe the Christian church at that time. And still today, many of us experience the sadness of quarrelling and division, despite the fact that the Lord Jesus left us His special command to love one another (John 13:34-35)! Why this terrible contrariness? James seems to highlight two reasons - selfish prayers (James 4:3) and friendship with the world (verse 4).

"You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures" (James 4:3). So often, alas, my prayers seem largely to be made up of requests for my needs that day. Of course, it's good to bring to God even the smallest details of our lives and share with Him our concerns and fears. He's interested in every part of our lives! But I need to spend more time thinking upon the greatness of God and praising Him for what He has already done for me, and then bring to Him the concerns and needs of my brothers and sisters in Christ. In that way, as I begin to see them as He sees them, I might be less likely to quarrel with them and more likely to love them!

"Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?" (James 4:4). James' Jewish listeners would be well aware of the fact that, frequently in the Old Testament, God had to charge the Israelites with adultery because they had turned away from Himself to serve other gods. Our unfaithfulness grieves Him deeply. That's why, in James 4:5, James writes, "The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously". The Holy Spirit indwells each believer in Christ and, as such, is a mark, or seal, of Christ's ownership (see Ephesians 1:13-14). In the best sense of the word, that Holy Spirit is jealous for our affections. He desires that our love be centred on the Lord Jesus alone.

Yes, we still have to live in this world. The Lord Jesus has left us here to serve Him in it. We need to be friendly towards those whom we meet. Only in this way can we show them something of the love of the Lord Jesus. But that does not mean that we fit in with their sinful ways simply to be one of them. The Lord Jesus was known as the Friend of tax collectors and sinners (Matthew 11:19) though, at the same time, He is described as "separate from sinners" (Hebrews 7:26). He was not part of their sinful ways.

James seems to be asking a lot of his readers and of us today - dealing with these troublesome tongues, showing that wisdom from above, defeating the devil. "Who is sufficient for these things?" we ask. The answer is in James 4:6: "He gives more grace". Whatever the need, the grace of God is more than sufficient to meet it! Paul had to learn that

lesson. After asking God three times to remove his thorn in the flesh, with apparent lack of success, he had this important message from the Lord Himself: "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

Annie Johnson Flint (1866-1932) has written:

*He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater;  
He sendeth more strength when the labours increase.  
To added affliction He addeth His mercy;  
To multiplied trials, His multiplied peace.*

As we come to an end this morning, let's leave the last words with James: "Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you ... Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up" (James 4:7-10).

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