

Admonition to Teachers (3:1-18)

Chapter three treats two subjects directly related to each other: The bridling of the tongue and the analysis of true wisdom. These subjects both refer to the teacher; the **first part** *relates to his responsibility and control of his speech (3:1-12)* and the **second** *to the teacher's wisdom (3:13-18)*. Wisdom and speech are connected in **Proverbs 31:26**, “*She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.*” James demands that the Christian put these rules into his life, so he can be a true ambassador of Jesus Christ.

Bridling the Tongue, James 3:1-12.

Introduction: **James 3:1-12** returns to a subject first mentioned **in 1:19, 26**. There he said, “*Be quick to hear, slow to speak.*” In **1:26** *lack of control of the tongue is mentioned as proof of the absence of practical application of religion that made religion vain*. Self-control and meekness of wisdom are further indications of pure religion or a part of one's works as a Christian which justification is achieved. As Paul would have said it, this is a part of working out our salvation as obedient children (**Phil. 2:12, 15**). *[Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling... that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world...]*

3:1) *Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.*

Teacher must here be seen against the backdrop of the Jewish rabbinical tradition. **Teacher** here would equal “Rabbi.” **Mt. 12:37** – “*for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.*” Jesus said these words in response to the Pharisees were claiming Jesus could do what he did by the power of Beelzebub, this

was an attempt to turn the people against Jesus. Jesus saw this as a misuse of the tongue. Compare to **Romans 2:19-24**, ***“and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”***

In the church the office of teacher seems to have depended upon ability to teach (**Titus 2:3-4**) and not on official appointment (as in our Sunday school teachers, or women’s Bible Study, etc. Teachers are mentioned in **1 Cor. 12:28; Acts 13:1; and Eph. 4:11-12**. In **1 Cor. 14:26-40** we have a passage which is especially instructive (Orderly Worship).

Teaching (a lesson) (**v. 26**) along with the exercise of spiritual gifts, seems to have been the privilege of those wishing to rise to speak. The author of Hebrews insists that all disciples by reason of time *“ought to be teachers”* (**Hebr. 5:12**). The exercise of the right in the assembly was denied women (**1 Cor. 14:34; 1 Tim. 2:12**), but opportunity for them to instruct must have been found in other circumstances (**1 Cor. 11:5; Titus 2:3f.**). Teachers were distinguished from prophets only in that the latter were inspired teachers.

With all the encouragement to teach in the N.T., it is evident that the prohibition here against letting *many become teachers* is not due to an excess of teachers or to discourage Christians from becoming teachers. James is warning of the dangers inherent in the responsibility of teaching, especially in view of the confusion and vileness (**vss. 13ff.**) resulting at times from the misuse of the position. All teachers, among whom James classes himself, will bear heavy responsibility for their

influence, due to their power in the eternal destiny of men whom they affect for good or ill. **Here is a paraphrase** of what James is trying to say, “Don’t many of you become teachers, if you are not certain that you can control your tongue, that your teaching ministry will yield peaceable results and that you are willing to shoulder the responsibility for your work as a teacher.”

Judged with greater strictness – (Compare to **Lk. 12:47ff.**) - ***And that servant who knew his master’s will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.***

One in the position of teacher is certainly assumed to know the Master’s will. Hence, the teacher must be prepared for greater censure and penalty for failing. The teacher proclaims God’s will and must proclaim it as God desires (**1 Peter 4:11; Gal. 1:10f.**). He will be judged on how well he does this.

2) For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.

James declares as a well-established truth, “***We all make many mistakes***” literally “***we all stumble with respect to many things***” (compare to **verse 10** “***From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.***” **2 Peter 1:10; Jude 24.**

That sin is universal is an axiomatic assertion of the Scriptures.

Romans 3:23 “***All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.***” **1 John 1:8** “***If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.***” There is no human infallibility. James point is that since this is true, it is clear that for any reason, other than the noblest motives,

the taking up of the calling which brings the greatest responsibility and the greatest temptation of all to sin.

It appears that Scripture is telling us that the tongue seems to be the most prevalent way for man to sin and the most difficult to avoid.

In his next statement it seems that James is using hyperbole, that is, exaggeration for emphasis. If you can find a person who makes not mistakes, you have found a remarkable person indeed. Either in teaching or in wicked or empty speech we all have sinned. The word ***perfect*** here is referring to one who has attained his end purpose, complete, lacking in nothing. That is one who is mature, full-grown, a well-rounded person. God is specifically trying to develop in us the same character that was found in Jesus Christ. Thus, someone who is perfect has achieved this character. This does not necessarily mean a sinless man, though in this passage in view of the difficulty of this attainment, it would approach that. Hence, the one not sinning “in word” must be all that God desires in a Christian.

Able to bridle the whole body also is amplification of the principle just explained. Someone who has control of the tongue, which is the unruliest part of the body, must then also have the rest of his body in check. Bridle here prefigures his illustration of bridling the horses in the next verse.

3) If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well.

This verse is a simple illustration. As one controls the body of a horse by controlling his mouth, so, if we can control our speech, we can regulate the entire body.

4) Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.

His next illustration of his point about the tongue, is *the ships*. Ships were a common sight on the seas of the Mediterranean world.

Comparatively speaking, the rudder compared to the ship as a whole is a small thing. Yet the pilot must only control the rudder in order to control the whole ship. The *will* means “*desire*,” “*inclination*,” or “*impulse*.” What ever direction the pilot wants to go, the rudder is how he instructs the ship to go that way.

5) So also, the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!

The *tongue* is indeed a very small object in the body – though James is using the word *tongue* to represent the organ of speech. Like the rudder, the *tongue* is a small thing, and just as the rudder can determine the course of the large ship, so the *tongue* has power to influence man’s whole course and destiny.

The damage such a little member can do is so great that it *boasts* of its power and influence. The tongue might say to all the larger members of the body, “*I can determine the course of all of you. Let all take note of my power.*” James shows that unfortunately such a boast is not an idle one. (Compare Mt. 5:29f.; 15:19; 1 John 2:16).

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! The Greek literally says, “*What size fire kindles what size forest!*” Little things often have great power. So, a careless word can consume a whole church. Compare Paul’s figure of a church devouring itself in Gal. 5:15 “*But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.*”