

# ***International Bible Lessons Commentary***

## ***James 3:1-18***

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**Sunday, February 23, 2014**

**L.G. Parkhurst, Jr.**

The **International Bible Lesson** (*Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series*) for **Sunday, February 23, 2014**, is from **James 3:1-18**. **Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further** follow the verse-by-verse *International Bible Lesson Commentary* below. **Study Hints for Thinking Further**, a study guide for teachers, discusses the five questions below to help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion; these hints are available on the [International Bible Lessons Commentary](#) website. The weekly *International Bible Lesson* is posted each Saturday before the lesson is scheduled to be taught.

### ***International Bible Lesson Commentary***

#### **James 3:1-18**

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

The crowds evaluated Jesus' teaching as one who taught with authority. His enemies tried to entrap Jesus as a teacher with various questions, and at one point Jesus said His teaching was more wise than King Solomon's teaching (Luke 11:31). God judges false prophets and teachers because they mislead people. Those who teach will be tested and evaluated more strictly than others. They must live in accordance with their teachings or be judged hypocrites. Jesus warned His disciples to beware the "teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matthew 16:12). Jesus also warned the Pharisees, "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them" (Matthew 23:13).

**(James 3:2) For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.**

People make mistakes that are unintentional errors in facts and judgments; these mistakes are not sins. Some mistakes are the result of sinful behavior and thinking, and where harm was intended. Some mistakes are unintentional and made because people have limited abilities and foresight. Someone may mistakenly think they are saying one thing when something else comes out of their mouths. Though mistaken statements may

not be sinful, they may still cause harm or mislead someone. Only God speaks and acts perfectly, and Jesus is our example of perfect speaking and acting. What we say is the most difficult part of our lives to control. It is easier to obey any of the Ten Commandments than to speak perfectly or speak without sin.

**(James 3:3) If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies.**

James used an illustration familiar to those who received his letter. They knew how riders or chariot drivers controlled horses. If believers can keep their mouths perfectly in check, then they have the power to choose how to use their bodies, because keeping their mouth perfectly in check is far more difficult than controlling their bodies. People can often keep their bodies out of trouble by keeping their mouths shut. We need God to put a figurative bit in our mouths to guide our words and deeds.

**(James 3:4) Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.**

Today, someone might argue from the fact that the steering wheel of a car or bus is small, but the driver can use it to take people wherever he wants them to go by turning that small wheel. Small things can create or move big things. Small deeds can bring big results. Small short words can work great good or great evil. We need God to pilot our lives and guide us where He wills.

**(James 3:5) So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!**

Some people use their tongues to brag or tell lies about themselves and their accomplishments. Some teachers may use their tongues to prove they are better or smarter than others (especially their students). Small boasts can lead to big problems, especially when one places their trust in someone who has misrepresented his abilities and experience. A “small” lie can lead to a “big” deception that creates great harm.

**(James 3:6) And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell.**

James wrote about what can happen when someone does not carefully control what they say. Even if they try to prayerfully control what they say, they can speak mistakenly or angrily and set events in motion that far exceed what was actually or originally said or done. Evil people can say or do things to believers that can influence them to say something that stains them and creates a cycle or escalation of sinful words and actions.

**(James 3:7) For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species,**

Both domestic and wild animals have been tamed by human beings, and God gave human beings dominion over all the animals (see Genesis 1:26). People have often watched amazed when some animals have responded to their trainers in ways thought impossible; but these animal acts are easier to achieve than the taming of a human tongue.

**(James 3:8) but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.**

Only God can tame the human tongue; however, God will only do so when we place ourselves under His dominion as our Lord. Apart from help from God, a person cannot tame their tongue, and with their mouths they will say evil or hurtful words even unintentionally sometimes. Goodhearted people will sometimes say destructive words in the heat of flaming anger, and it can poison a relationship forever. James wanted to impress upon believers how important it is to guard our emotions, emotional responses, and emotional words that can do so much harm.

**(James 3:9) With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.**

James wrote to believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. Though made in the likeness of God, human beings have not perfectly obeyed God. Believers are not perfect and in this life they do not speak perfectly, but they cannot use their human imperfections as excuses for not changing. Believers in the Lord Jesus Christ bless God in their prayers, songs of praise, and worship. However, believers may also misuse their tongues and in front of others or behind their backs say things about them that are evil or untrue. Believers who have been wronged by others can also sin by cursing them instead of praying for those who have wronged them to change and do right. Jesus commanded, “Bless those who curse you and pray for those who abuse you” (Luke 6:28).

**(James 3:10) From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.**

Believers ought not to both bless and curse, because they have accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior, and Jesus can guard their mouths if they will let Him. Blessing others should be the aim of Christians. Cursing shows a lack of maturity or self-control. Some who claim to be Christians take the name of the Lord in vain, and they must strive to overcome this evil habit, even if those around them do not refrain from misusing Jesus’ name.

**(James 3:11) Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water?**

Naturally, a single stream from a single source cannot pour forth two different types of water at the same time. Water can flow fresh and clean or water can become polluted. It cannot be both pure and polluted at the same time. Likewise, Christians should not both

bless and curse, and if their hearts are right with God they will not curse others but bless them.

**(James 3:12) Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.**

James once again appealed to people's commonsense or ability to reason when he wrote to encourage Christians to control themselves or to put themselves prayerfully under the control of the Holy Spirit so they will understand and behave according to the Scriptures. People reap what they sow. Grapevines produce grapes, not figs. Adding salt to water will not make it fresh. The true followers of Christ will bless and not curse.

**(James 3:13) Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.**

True wisdom will rightly apply knowledge, and understanding will know the consequences of right and wrong thoughts, choices, and behavior. Christians should choose to live a good life and produce good fruits in words and actions. Wisdom should inspire people to speak gently instead of cursing.

**(James 3:14) But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth.**

Christians should be filled with the love of God and the Holy Spirit, and must read the Scriptures to know the truth and pray with submission to Jesus Christ in order maintain an open mind and heart to receive the Spirit's leading. If a Christian is filled with the Spirit, there is no room for bitter envy or selfish ambition in their lives. One who calls himself a Christian while maintaining bitter envy and pursuing selfish ambition is false to the truth, the truth about what kind of a person he really is.

**(James 3:15) Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish.**

Christians have access to divine revelation and wisdom in the Bible and in the life of Jesus Christ, Whose Spirit lives within them. Those who reject divine wisdom have limited themselves to what they can learn from experience, observation, their own thinking abilities, and the ideas of others. People should not be surprised when those who have turned from divine wisdom do what is earthly, unspiritual, and devilish.

**(James 3:16) For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.**

One can look at the way many governments function around the world and see the consequences of envy and selfish ambition, for these governments are disorderly and their rulings bring disorder and endorse wickedness of every kind that supposedly will benefit those who are earthly or worldly. Unhappily, envy and selfish ambition can also be found among people in a church. Disorder and wickedness in a church can

sometimes be traced to the envy and selfish ambition that motivates some in a church. Sometimes church leaders with selfish ambition will lead a church in ways that favor them and meet their needs instead of the way God approves in the service of His people.

**(James 3:17) But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.**

The Bible encourages people to live by faith in Jesus Christ. True faith in Jesus Christ as Savior will free sinners from cursing, envy, selfishness, showing partiality, hypocrisy, and wickedness. Following Jesus Christ as Lord of your life will free you to act on the divine wisdom you learn from the Bible so you can bear the fruits of the Holy Spirit. A person can use the list of traits in verse 17 in order to test themselves and discover where they need to grow spiritually. Being “willing to yield” does not mean willing to yield and let wickedness do whatever it wants; rather, James meant believers should be willing to yield and do what God wants or be willing to yield and do what someone else wants (as long as it is not wrong) rather than insisting everything always be done your own way. Being full of mercy will inspire you to pray for someone to make the changes they need rather than cursing them. Prayer for others and blessing others are good fruits to bear. Having a pure motive and being peaceable and gentle toward those who need correction will produce better results than cursing them.

**(James 3:18) And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.**

The wicked behavior of others may influence a Christian to curse the wicked and retaliate against them; however, a harvest of righteousness may come from blessing those who practice wickedness, and from praying that they will repent of their sins and come to saving faith in Jesus Christ, Who can save them from their wicked practices. If the person practicing wickedness claims to be a Christian, believers can pray for God to discipline them in ways that will lead them to repent and follow Jesus so they can receive the blessing of God’s forgiveness and the gift of eternal life. Those who make peace will not compromise with wickedness, but by sowing the word of God in peace believers may enjoy a harvest of righteousness within themselves and among others; and in addition, peace among people living right with God and others. If believers sow the word of God in peace, they will harvest righteousness in their own lives and enjoy peace with God.

### **Five Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further**

1. What reason did James give when he advised that not many believers should become teachers?
2. Name two things that James compared the tongue to that his readers would understand? Name two things that you might compare the tongue to that people should understand where you live today?

3. How can the tongue be compared to a small fire started in a forest?
4. How might the tongue cause problems in a church?
5. What did James write about the behavior of those who are wise and understanding in a church?

Begin or close your class by reading the short weekly *International Bible Lesson*.

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