



International Bible Lessons Commentary

Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series

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James 3:1-18 New American Standard Bible February 11, 2018

The [International Bible Lesson](#) (*Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series*) for **Sunday, February 11, 2018**, is from **James 3:1-18** (Some will only study **James 3:1-12**). **Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further** follow the verse-by-verse *International Bible Lesson Commentary*. **Study Hints for Discussion and Thinking Further** will help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion: these hints are available on the [International Bible Lessons Commentary](#) website along with the *International Bible Lesson* that you may want to read to your class as part of your Bible study. You can discuss each week's commentary and lesson at the [International Bible Lesson Forum](#).

(James 3:1) Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.

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 declared His teaching was more wise than King Solomon's teaching (Luke 11:31). God judges false prophets and false 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). Sincere Bible-believing teachers who pray for the help of the Holy Spirit when they teach will not be condemned if they make a mistake, but with a teachable spirit they will learn from their mistakes, correct them, and whenever possible correct their mistakes with their students.

(James 3:2) For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.

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 some “mistakes” are taught with harmful intention. 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. As Bible teachers we sometimes stumble, so we need to teach with humility before God and others.

(James 3:3) Now if we put the bits into the horses’ mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well.

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 to pray and ask God to put a figurative bit in our mouths to guide our words and deeds.

(James 3:4) Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires.

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 to humbly and submissively ask God to pilot our thoughts and our lives and guide us where He wills.

(James 3:5) So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!

Some people use their tongues to brag or tell lies about themselves and their accomplishments. Some use lies to destroy the reputation of a godly teacher. 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 very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is 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 factually intended, 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. Christians and teachers have many spiritual enemies that will tempt them to say and do things that will promote the devil’s work. Teachers need the prayers of faithful students.

(James 3:7) For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race.

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 our taming of our human tongues.

(James 3:8) But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and 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. Each day Christians need to pray for God to tame their tongues. 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. And when we sin with our tongues, we need to ask forgiveness.

(James 3:9) With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been 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 both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.

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 cursing and misusing Jesus’ name.

(James 3:11) Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter 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 brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce 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 among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom.

True wisdom will rightly apply knowledge, and understanding will know the consequences of right and wrong thoughts, choices, and behaviors. 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 jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth.

Christians should be filled with the love of God and the Holy Spirit; therefore, they 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; therefore, the Holy Spirit will help them overcome feelings of envy and self-centered ambitions. 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 and the kind of person Christians should aspire to become and be.

(James 3:15) This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic.

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 say and do what is earthly, unspiritual, and devilish. As Christians, we can pray for God to show us how to help or avoid such people.

(James 3:16) For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing.

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 primarily in order to meet their self-centered desires instead leading in the ways God approves in the service of His people.

(James 3:17) But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without 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; then, you will 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 repent and 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 their own way. Being full of mercy will inspire you to pray for someone to make the changes they need rather than cursing them. Praying 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. Teachers need to teach facts from the Bible and demonstrate how those facts have made a difference in their lives and can make a difference in the lives of those they teach by being “peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.”

(James 3:18) And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by 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 and fill them with the Holy Spirit. 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 once again; then, they can receive the blessing of God’s forgiveness, presence, and His assurance 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.

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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