



International Bible Study Commentary

Verse-by-Verse Bible Lessons Thru the Bible

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Lesson 6

James 3:1-12 Commentary New American Standard Bible

Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further follow the verse-by-verse [International Bible Study 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 Study 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 Study 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 and declared that He taught with authority. Yet, His enemies tried to entrap Jesus as a teacher with various questions, and at one point Jesus said His teaching was wiser and greater than King Solomon's teaching. In Luke 11:31, we read these words of Jesus, "The queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the people of this generation and condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here!"

God condemns false prophets and teachers because they can mislead people away from God and the truth and into believing and practicing evil. After they begin practicing evil, they can influence their families, friends, and neighbors to practice evil also. Those who teach will be tested and evaluated more strictly than others, because teachers have more influence over more people than those who do not teach. Teachers must live according to what they teach 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 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 can make mistakes that are unintentional errors in facts and judgments; these mistakes are not sins, but these mistakes can lead others into sin. Some intended “mistakes” are the result of sinful behavior and thinking, and they can cause much harm. Some mistakes are unintentional and made because people have limited abilities and foresight, but they can still cause harm. Someone may mistakenly think they are saying one thing when something else comes out of their mouth instead. Though mistaken statements may not be sinful, they may still cause harm or mislead someone. Only God speaks and acts perfectly all the time. Jesus Christ is our example of perfect speaking and acting. The Holy Spirit can help people understand the Scriptures and influence them to say and do much good. What we say is the most difficult part of our lives to control. It is easier to obey any one of the Ten Commandments than to speak perfectly or speak without sin all the time. We can move our tongues so easily and quickly, too easily and quickly. Therefore, as Christians, whenever we teach or give advice, we need to pray for the Holy Spirit to help us do so without making any mistakes. And if we do make a mistake that the Holy Spirit would delete that mistake from the minds of our listeners (or readers) or help us correct our mistakes as quickly as possible and ask forgiveness.

(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 put bits in the mouths of their horses to lead them. If believers can always keep their mouths perfectly in check, they also have the power to choose how to use their bodies, because keeping their mouths 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 thoughts, 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 illustrate James's teaching by comparing the tongue to the small steering wheel of a car or bus. The driver can use that small wheel to take people wherever he wants them to go by turning it. 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 pray and ask God to pilot our lives and our mouths and guide us where He wills. We need to pray that God will help us "will that we will always and only do the will of God." Our study of the Bible enables us to learn the perfect will of God for everyone, and we can pray that the Holy Spirit will help us apply the Bible's teachings every day in every way.

(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 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 their abilities and experience. For example, a surgeon who tries to perform surgery with a falsified medical license can do great damage and even murder their patient. A "small" lie can lead to a "big" deception that creates great harm as it misleads many. The devil can manipulate a false prophet and enable them to perform great exploits in order to mislead those who believe their teachings.

(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 actually or originally said or intended. 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 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. In Genesis 1:26, we read, “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’” People have often watched amazed when some animals have responded to their trainers in ways thought impossible; but these trained “animal acts” are easier to achieve than the taming of a human tongue.

(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 and Savior. Apart from God’s help, 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 for they can do so much harm.

(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. In this life, even believers in the Lord Jesus Christ do not live and speak perfectly. Even though believers do not speak perfectly, and know they do not, they cannot use their human imperfections as excuses for not changing or for not trying to change—with the help of the Holy Spirit, prayer, and reading the Scriptures. Believers in the Lord Jesus Christ may bless God with their prayers, songs of praise, and worship. Unhappily, they may also misuse their tongues to gossip and say things about others 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. In Luke 6:27-28, Jesus commanded, “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”

(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 Christ as their Lord and Savior, Jesus can guard their mouths if they let Him. Christians should aim to bless everyone. 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 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 from that single source. Water can begin to flow fresh and clean, but that water can become polluted as it flows downstream. At the source, pure water is not polluted. Likewise, Christians should not both bless and curse. If their hearts are right with God, they will not curse others but always strive to bless them.

When the Holy Spirit comes to live within the heart of a believer in Jesus Christ, pure speech and a pure life pours forth from the Holy Spirit. However, if a believer is not careful their thoughts, words, and actions can become polluted with impurities they have added to their beliefs and thoughts or errors they have learned from others. We must pray and ask the Holy Spirit to keep our hearts (including our thoughts and choices) pure. In Matthew 5:8, Jesus promised, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”

In 2 Timothy 2:22-26, Paul wrote: “Shun youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. Have nothing to do with stupid and senseless controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to everyone, an apt teacher, patient, correcting opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth, and that they may escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will.”

(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 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 the water fresh. Believers need to pray for God’s grace to help them not add anything that is impure to their lives and to resist any temptations to do so.

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?

3. Where you live today, name two things that you might compare the tongue to that people should understand?
4. How can the tongue be compared to a small fire started in a forest?
5. How can the Holy Spirit make a difference in a Christian's life?

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