

## Wisdom from Heaven

James 3:1-18

Key verse 17 “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.”

In the previous chapter, James taught us that faith and actions work together. In chapter 3, James speaks to teachers in the church. Who should become teachers? Only seminary graduates? That’s not true! James says that those who have received wisdom from above should become teachers. It is because heavenly wisdom can tame the tongue which is the main instrument that teachers use. He also says that those who live a good life, with deeds done in the humility that comes from heavenly wisdom should become teachers. In contrast, he explains how destructive and hypocritical are natural tongues that are controlled by worldly wisdom. Those with worldly wisdom should never dare to become teachers. In this message, let’s learn what heavenly wisdom is like and how it tames our tongues so that we can grow into mature teachers like our Lord Jesus Christ.

### I. Heavenly wisdom controls the tongue (1-12)

James’ main audience in this passage are those who aspire to become teachers and those who are already teachers. What did he say to them? Look at verse 1a. “Not many of you should become teachers!” What? Didn’t Jesus command his apostles to make disciples of all nations by *teaching* them everything he had commanded them? Teaching ministry is essential in the church now and then! Why then did James say such a contradictory thing? When the Bible sounds contradictory, we need to read it from the immediate context. Look at verse 2. “We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.” James says that we all stumble in many ways, especially in what we say. Among all of us, teachers and pastors speak often and for a long time. The more we say, the more often and more easily we will stumble in what we say. James’ warning to the church is that we should not propel ourselves and others prematurely to the position of teaching, which can be a short-cut to stumble.

Secondly, James warns teachers because they will be judged more strictly. James says in verse 1b, “...you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.” Jesus also said in Matthew 12:36-37, “But I tell you everyone will have to give account on the Day of Judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”

We now have a dilemma: to become a teacher or not? At this moment, we need to clarify what James truly wants to say from the context. Look at verse 2b again. “Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body.” Contemporary English version translates this part as follows, “But if you can control your tongue, you are mature and able to control your whole body.” James’ message is that we all, teachers, pastors and leaders should

learn to control our tongues, grow mature and learn to control our whole body. As we know both about the importance of the teaching in the church and the potential danger of our words, we ought to learn to control our tongue and use it wisely, which leads us to spiritual maturity.

We may wonder why the mastery of the tongue is the way to the spiritual maturity. Aren't there other ways? Like higher education, marriage, hardships, aging, sickness and many other experiences? Yes- God uses all these to grow us into maturity. But the tongue has great power to give life or to give death in all circumstances (Pr. 18:21). So, a spiritually mature person must master the tongue as a mature surgeon masters how to use the scalpel to give life, otherwise he can use it to bring death.

In verses 3-12, James teaches us about the dangerous nature the tongue with many illustrations, which potential teachers and teachers have to know. I want to group them in four ways.

First, Look at verses 3-4. "When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go." What is James' point through these two examples? Look at verse 5a. "Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts." The tongue is small but once it is controlled, the whole body can be controlled. The tongue is small, but it can boast of many things. One boxer said, "I am the greatest!" The first nature of the tongue is that it is disproportionately powerful and it is mainly boastful.

Here is the second way the tongue can be dangerous. Look at verses 5b-6. "Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell." Look at verse 8b. "It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison." James illustrates what the tongue is like.

A small tongue is like a fire. A small uncontrolled spark with the aid of strong winds can destroy a great forest in a few hours like we are seeing throughout the west coast and now Colorado. Likewise, one's whole body and the whole course of one's life can be destroyed by one's small untamed tongue or by others' uncontrolled words, especially hurtful words of a parent or teacher.

James is here using a very strong word: hell in verse 6; the tongue that sets on fire "is set itself on fire by hell." Here "hell" is "*Gehenna*" in Greek, which is a valley west and south of Jerusalem. There the garbage from Jerusalem, even dead bodies were burned day after day causing terrible odor and smoke. This "*Gehenna*" is also symbolically known as the lake of fire in the book of Revelation. I hope we all remember this imagery whenever uncontrolled fiery and foul-smelling words are about to come out of our mouths.

After calling the tongue a fire, James calls it "a world of evil among the parts of the body." When we carefully hear what the tongue says, we can find everything evil in the world from it: boasts, fighting, condemnation, lies, flattery, gossip, slandering, judging, complaints,

contempt, disrespect, despair, fear, bitterness, anger. You can name anything evil in the world. I can find it on my tongue. Of course, there is a deeper reason why the tongue is called a world of evil. Jesus said in Matthew 12:34, “You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.” Jesus again said in Matthew 15:18-19, “But the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts – murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.” The tongue is connected to the heart. It is the audible expression of the totally depraved, corrupted, sin-stained heart.

James calls the tongue a restless evil as well. The uncontrolled tongue roams like a restless wild animal, quick to defend itself, swift to attack others, anxious to subdue them, always marked by evil like Satan.

James again says, “It (the tongue) corrupts the whole body... full of deadly poison.” Just imagine there is a big bottle of pure water and your enemy drops a drop of concentrated dark poisoned ink into it. Again, imagine that a venomous snake bites you; then its venom begins to spread throughout your body. Can you believe that the tongue, yours and mine can do such things?

Let’s sum up the second nature of the tongue. The tongue, though it is small, is connected to the heart and reveals the depravity of the sin-stained heart, which is deadly poison.

While learning about the first and second nature of the tongue, we might desperately seek after any possible remedy for our tongues. What does James say? Look at verses 7-8a. “All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue.” The third nature of the tongue is that it is untamable by any human being.

Look at verses 9-12. “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brother and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.” The fourth nature of the tongue is its hypocrisy or inconsistency. James says, “My brothers and sisters, this should not be.”

These four natures of the tongue are absolutely true for those who do not believe in Jesus. How about believers? James addresses these issues of the tongue to his fellow Christian teachers. Why? It is because all the evil things he mentions in relation to the tongue happen in the Christian community now and then. How easily and quickly the failure to control the tongue can destroy the loving community that has taken years to build! How often we bring destructive and poisonous words into our relationships, families and communities? Lord, have mercy upon our tongues!

Before we move to the next section, I want to tell you a biblical story related to the lips. Can you guess who he might be! It is Isaiah the prophet. Before his commission in chapter 6, he proclaimed the six woes to the Israelites for their sins in chapter 5. To whom do you think he

proclaimed the seventh woe? Alas! It was to himself. In chapter 6, as he saw the Lord Almighty who is Holy, Holy, Holy, he cried saying, “Woe to me. I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.” Then one of the seraphs flew to him with live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched his mouth and said, “See this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

Like Isaiah prophet, we teachers, pastors and leaders are always in desperate need of “live coal,” which is the gospel. The gospel we accepted long ago when you became Christians is what we all the more need right now. No human being can tame/control the tongue. This issue of the tongue is so real to each of us. But our Lord Jesus, who is the wisdom from God (1 Co 1:30), did something amazing to our tongue. When we were crucified with Christ, our whole being including our tongue was also crucified with him. When we were raised from the dead, we received a new and redeemed tongue as well. Therefore, each of us needs to preach the gospel to our tongue and let Jesus in us use it as his own. We ought to be filled with the Holy Spirit, through whom we can put to death our old destructive, boastful, evil, corrupting, inconsistent, hypocritical tongues. While we constantly tame and control our tongues with the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, can you imagine how wonderfully and powerfully your and my tongues can be used to nurture and build up the church?

## II. The heavenly wisdom that is accompanied by deeds done in humility (13-16)

Remember that James’ main audience are teachers. His first admonition to them is “Learn to tame your tongues!” In verse 13, he again tells them something very challenging. Let’s read it. “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.” When teachers teach “correct doctrines” in lecture rooms with deep understanding and eloquent words, they may think of themselves as knowledgeable, well-versed and conservative. It may be true. James, however, challenges them to show their wisdom and understanding through their life, especially by their deeds. Wisdom and actions should work together! Once heavenly wisdom is sown in our hearts, it takes our hearts as its home. It recreates, transforms and renews our hearts and tongues so that we can become humble in our attitude like Jesus. Then it bears the fruit of good deeds.

Two years ago I visited a pastor in his late 70’s. I shared with him my agonies caused by the two brain surgeries. My left eye, left-side lips and tongue don’t work well. He drove silently for quite a while and then opened his mouth, “David! Why don’t you use what works for God? The rest of your whole body looks fine to me!” While spending two days with him, he told me about his church- with many sick and needy people—whom he has been sacrificially serving, even though he was in his late seventies. I learned much more from him in two days than in 2 years of seminary lectures. Surely heavenly wisdom and good deeds were working together in his life.

In contrast, James tells us a case study in verses 14-16, which show how worldly wisdom works with hypocritical deeds. Look at verse 14. “But if you (teachers) harbor bitter envy and

selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.” Can you imagine a teacher in the church has “envy and selfish ambition” in his heart? If his desires for ambition have not been fully met in the church, he can become bitter inside. What is worse, he goes around boasting about what he has done, exaggerating the small things he did and is doing as if the whole church would collapse without him. But in truth, all those things have been done in bitter envy and selfish-ambition. James calls such actions as “denying the truth” or “lying against the truth” as Satan has done.

The worst thing such a teacher will do to himself is found in the two words in verse 15. “... such wisdom.” Sadly such a teacher thinks of himself as wise, reasonable, open-minded, claiming his rights, etc. What self-deceit! James says in verse 15, “... such wisdom does not come down from heaven, but is earthly, unspiritual and demonic.” Such wisdom is from the earth, not from the Holy Spirit but from demons.

What are the effects of such worldly wisdom? Verse 16 says, “For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.” Such a teacher can damage and destroy himself, his family, and the church community.

I can’t but ask God’s mercy upon myself and all teachers. May the Holy Spirit remove bitter envy and selfish ambition from our hearts and fill our hearts with humility that comes from wisdom so that we can become clean vessels for God to use. May the Holy Spirit empower us to live a good life, by deeds so that we all become a source of blessing in our community. May the Holy Spirit circumcise our hearts and community of any worldly wisdom that has been practiced without being held in check.

### III. The characteristics of the heavenly wisdom (17-18)

In contrast to the worldly wisdom, James begins to talk about “heavenly wisdom.” Let’s read verse 17 together. “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.” I would like to elaborate on 6 characteristics of heavenly wisdom.

- 1) This wisdom comes from heaven. It is a gift from God. It is infused into the heart by the Spirit of God; and leads into the knowledge of the things that are heavenly. Those who are possessed of it are true teachers.
- 2) Heavenly wisdom is first of all pure. It is free from everything that is earthly, unspiritual and demonic. It produces purity of heart, of life, and in conversations. It is the means of keeping you and me pure and free from impure lusts, bitter envy and selfish ambition, pride and boasting.
- 3) Heavenly wisdom is peace-loving: peaceable. Those who have heavenly wisdom can live in peace with anyone and even with their enemies. It makes you and me gentle and

patient and loving that covers a multitude of others' sins. Heavenly wisdom enables us to forgive others and concede our rights for the sake of peace.

- 4) Heavenly wisdom is considerate and submissive. It enables us to submit ourselves under God and others willingly. We can speak well of others, and their conduct and life. Heavenly wisdom is far from being proud, arrogant and overbearing.
- 5) Heavenly wisdom is full of mercy and good fruit. It is full of compassion to the poor. It feeds the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the widows and fatherless in their affliction. It does all other good works and duties, both with respect to God and man as fruits of Jesus' grace and of the Holy Spirit.
- 6) Heavenly wisdom is impartial and sincere. It sees all man equal before God and never become half-hearted in whatever they do.

As we are listing the character of the wisdom from heaven, most of us will see that these are characteristics of our Lord Jesus Christ. They are very similar to the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Then those who are united with Christ Jesus by faith and who have received the Holy Spirit do have this heavenly wisdom, don't we? Do you believe this? So now we have one obligation. Our obligation is to live by heavenly wisdom, not to live according to the worldly one. We need to nurture and fan into flame heavenly wisdom more and more by using it in our daily lives and reap a harvest of righteous deeds through our life and ministry.

May God bless you and me to keep taming and controlling our tongues with heavenly wisdom, living a good life and bearing the fruit of the deeds that are done in humility that comes from heavenly wisdom. May heavenly wisdom renew and transform our hearts, tongues, life and actions. May heavenly wisdom keep using you as good teachers for your bible students, children, and his church now and forever.