The Book of James

Chapter 3

Ministry Reading

Opening Reading -- James 3:1-18

James 3:1-18

Be not many teachers, my brethren, knowing that we shall receive greater judgment, for we all often offend. If anyone offend not in word, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body too. Behold, we put the bits in the mouths of the horses, that they may obey us, and we turn round their whole bodies. Behold also the ships, which are so great and driven by violent winds, are turned about by a very small rudder, wheresoever the pleasure of the helmsman will. Thus also the tongue is a little member, and boasts great things. See how little a fire, how large a wood it kindles. And the tongue is fire, the world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set in our members, the defiler of the whole body, and which sets fire to the course of nature, and is set on fire of hell. For every species, both of beasts and of birds, both of creeping things and of sea animals, is tamed and has been tamed by the human species. But the tongue can no one among men tame. It is an unsettled evil, full of death-bringing poison. Therewith bless we the Lord and Father, and therewith curse we men, made after the likeness of God. Out of the same mouth goes forth blessing and cursing. It is not right, my brethren, that these things should be thus. Does the fountain out of the same opening pour forth sweet and bitter? Can, my brethren, a fig produce olives, or a vine figs? Neither can salt water make sweet water. Who is wise in understanding among you? Let

him show out of a good conversation his works in meekness of wisdom. But if ye have bitter emulation and strife in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This is not the wisdom which comes down from above, but earthly, natural, devilish. For where emulation and strife are, there is disorder in every evil thing. But the wisdom from above first is pure, then peaceful, gentle, yielding, full of mercy and good fruits, unquestioning, unfeigned. But the fruit of righteousness in peace is sown for them that make peace.

Verse 1 and the Chapter: Self-Government Before Teaching

What does verse 1 have to do with the rest of this chapter? At first reading it can seem to stand by itself -- 'Be not many teachers' -- before the chapter moves on to bits, bridles, rudders, and the tongue. But there is a direct connection. The chapter is about governance and control: horses are governed by bits in their mouths, great ships are turned by a small rudder, the whole body is guided by the tongue. And the point of verse 1 is this: many people desire to be teachers before they have learned to govern themselves. The one who aspires to teach others must first have been subject to the discipline that the rest of the chapter describes. Greater judgment applies to the teacher precisely because the teacher is accountable both for what he says and for whether his life answers to it.

Darby's rendering of verse 2 sharpens the point considerably. Where the Authorized Version reads 'we offend all,' Darby has 'we all often offend.' The difference is significant: it is not that we offend everyone, but that each of us offends frequently. That is the honest acknowledgment from which this chapter proceeds.

God Is Not Looking for Volunteers

A brother who had the happy privilege of ministering in the assembly was accustomed to repeat certain things he wished to impress, and one of them was this: God is not looking for volunteers. 'Be not many teachers' does not mean that God does not give teachers -- He does. But there is no shortage of volunteers in Christendom for this, that, and the other thing, and the question in every case is whether God has sent. That is what each of us must reckon with. God is looking for worshippers: those who worship in spirit and in truth. That is what He seeks.

The Lord's Own Example: Learning Before Teaching

Even of the Lord Jesus, Acts 1:1 speaks of 'all that Jesus began both to do and to teach' -- doing first, then teaching. And Isaiah 50:4 gives us His own word: 'Morning by morning He openeth mine ear to hear as the learner.' Thirty years of that -- of learning, of the opened ear, of disciplined dependence upon the Father -- and then three years of public ministry. Bible colleges may offer a three-year course to equip a man to preach for thirty; the Lord spent thirty years learning, and then taught three years in practice. The order is instructive.

The Centurion: Under Authority

The centurion of Matthew 8 gives a striking illustration of what the opening of this chapter has in view. He came to the Lord on behalf of his sick servant, and the reason he gave for his confidence that the Lord could simply speak the word was this:

> **Matthew 8:9**
> *For I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me, and I say to this man, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it.*

The centurion had discovered the principle at work. He was, in his own sphere, that little thing -- like the bit, like the rudder -- that governed those under him. But he could do so only because he himself was under authority, subject to those above him. He had learned to take orders before he gave them. A brother who had served in the Coast Guard for many years put it simply: before we can give orders, we have to learn to take them. That is the same principle. In our Christian life we must listen to the Master, receive His instruction, carry it out in our doing, and then help others in teaching the same.

The Tongue Controls the Body: Little Things, Great Effects

The message of verses 2 through 6 is that a controlled tongue is the basis for controlling the whole body. And the illustrations all press the same point: little things govern great things. A bit in a horse's mouth directs the whole animal. A rudder at the stern of a great ship, driven by violent winds, determines the ship's entire course. A small fire kindles vast forests. The tongue is a little member and boasts great things.

The positive side of this is not to be forgotten. A word spoken in due season -- how good it is, says the Proverb. A few words backed up by a life can mean everything to a soul at the end of its days. And the Lord Himself used a word in due season when He said to Paul in the night, 'Be of good cheer, Paul: as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome.' Paul needed that. That word came at exactly the right moment.

The Pleasure of the Helmsman

Darby's rendering of the end of verse 4 is particularly beautiful: the ship is turned 'wheresoever the pleasure of the helmsman will.' That expression lifts the whole discussion of guidance and governance out of the merely mechanical and connects it with will -- the will of one who steers with purpose. In a world that

makes so much of self-will, and in religious circles where men even claim to have been saved by an act of their own will, this is a significant correction. Ephesians 1 is a chapter full of the good pleasure of God's will. Behind the behavior of horses and the courses of ships and the circumstances of men, there is the good pleasure of God's will. Our tongues should be subject to that good pleasure, steered by the Helmsman.

Acts 15:7 -- God Made Choice

Peter's words at the Jerusalem council have a direct bearing on this matter of who speaks, and when, and to whom:

> **Acts 15:7**
> *And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel and believe.*

Peter said 'God made choice.' God not only chose the message; He chose the speaker, and He chose the listeners. A great many disputes and arguments would be prevented if those who wish to speak remembered that the prerogative of choosing the speaker belongs to God.

Ahimaaz and Cushi: The Wrong Messenger at the Wrong Time

A vivid example from 2 Samuel 18 illustrates the danger of volunteering to carry a message God has not assigned. When Absalom fell in battle, Ahimaaz pressed Joab to let him run with the news to David. Joab refused and sent Cushi. But Ahimaaz pressed again and was allowed to go, and he outran Cushi to the king. The difficulty was that the message he carried did not meet David's need. He was not the right messenger. When Cushi arrived, he delivered the full and accurate

word that was intended for David. Here was a case where the feet were not under proper governance, and self-will placed the tongue in the wrong place with the wrong message. The will of the helmsman was that Cushi should go -- and no amount of eager running could substitute for that.

The Knowledge of His Will: Colossians 1:9

The apostle's prayer for the Colossians bears on the same subject from another angle:

> **Colossians 1:9**
> *For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding, that ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing.*

The Colossians were in danger of being drawn away into philosophy, which centers on man and puts self forward. The remedy was the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding -- so that the walk should be worthy. Whether it be the feet and where they walk, or the hands and what they do, or the tongue and what it says, all these little things require that knowledge of His will and that walk of faithfulness. How can we say we are trying to be faithful in the little things of life if we are not willing to be controlled? That is the heart of the matter.

Guided by His Eye, Not the Bridle

Psalm 32 draws a pointed contrast. God says, 'I will guide thee with mine eye upon thee. Be not as a horse or as a mule which have no understanding, whose mouth must be held in with bit and bridle, that they come not near unto thee.' To be guided by the eye of God is the privilege of those who are in communion with

Him, attentive to the slightest indication of His will -- like a servant in a household whose eye is always on the master, sensitive to what the movement of his eye may convey. The bit and the bridle are for the fool who thinks he needs no guidance and will not respond to anything gentler. The circumstances of life then become his double bit, and they pinch. A stubborn horse requires a pincher bridle -- one that exerts pressure from both sides -- and then it sits up and takes notice. Some of us need the double bit because the tongue is not in control. The meek and attentive soul does not need it.

Tongue Can No Man Tame: A Statement of Inability

Verse 8 is a statement of inability, not a counsel of despair. 'The tongue can no one among men tame.' Just as the Lord said, 'No man can come to me except the Father who hath sent me draw him' -- that is inability rooted in the bondage of the will -- so here, the tongue is in bondage because the will is in bondage. Man's will, acquired in the fall, is not free. His tongue follows his will. And so the tongue is an unsettled evil, full of death-bringing poison.

The smooth talker may sound impressive; but flattering speech is often poison in action -- advancing its possessor in the world at others' expense. The indigenous peoples had an expression for treacherous speech: 'white man speaks with forked tongue.' The image is accurate. Out of the same mouth come blessing and cursing. That is the character of the untamed tongue.

The Virtuous Woman's Tamed Tongue: Proverbs 31:26

But what man cannot do, God can. The very last chapter of Proverbs describes the virtuous woman at length, and among her qualities is this:

> **Proverbs 31:26**

> *She openeth her mouth with wisdom, and in her tongue is the law of kindness.*

That is a tamed tongue -- not tamed by man, but by God. A brother once reflected quietly on that verse and as much as confessed that as a young man he had no clear sense of God's will for his life, and in particular no idea whether he should seek a wife. Then he noticed something in one of the young Christian women he knew: in her tongue was the law of kindness. It struck him deeply. Years later, married to her and with a lovely Christian family, he still spoke of it. She was, by all accounts, one of the most kindly spoken women one could hope to meet. The law of kindness is not a human achievement -- it is what God does in a soul yielded to Him.

Verses 9-12: The Mixture of Two Natures

Verses 9 through 12 describe a mixture, and that mixture presupposes two natures in the same person -- the old and the new. The tongue can follow one or the other. Out of the same mouth go blessing and cursing; from the same fountain flow sweet water and bitter. But as James says plainly, 'These things ought not to be so.'

What searching of heart comes when we set beside this the perfect example of our Lord Jesus Christ. John 12:49 records His own words: 'For I have not spoken from myself, but the Father who sent me, He gave me commandment, what I should say and what I should speak.' Every word He ever spoke was given Him by the Father. There was never an idle word, never a mixture, never a departure from that pure spring. All from above. That is the standard, and it is a standard that searches every conscience.

It is also worth noting that faithfulness in speech does not always mean pleasant speech. Ahimaaz wanted to spare David the hardest news; Cushi delivered it. The

wounds of a friend are faithful, though they are wounds. The question is always one of manner and motive -- of whether the word comes from the will of the Helmsman or from one's own impulse. What matters is not whether the word is gentle or sharp, but whether it comes from above.

Meekness and Wisdom: Verse 13

Verse 13 moves from the tongue to the life. Darby uses 'understanding' where the Authorized Version has 'knowledge.' The implication is a personal acquaintance with the mind of God -- an experiential understanding of divine things, not an abstract accumulation of information. The wise and understanding person shows it 'out of a good manner of life, his works in meekness of wisdom.' Meekness is not weakness; it is the refusal to insist on one's own rights. Moses was the meekest man on earth at the time, yet he was also a great leader, set over the people of God. His meekness was shown precisely when his authority was challenged: he fell on his face before God and referred the matter to Him. The Lord Jesus is the supreme example -- never a spirit of self-assertion, never a word that said, in effect, 'Do you know who I am?'

The Heart Crowded: Verse 14

Verse 14 is brief in print but full of content. In those three lines there are four things in the heart simultaneously: bitterness, envy, strife, and boasting. With a heart crowded with those things, it is no wonder that what comes out of the mouth does not glorify God. The tongue follows the heart. This is why the chapter's answer to the tongue problem is not primarily an exercise of willpower over speech, but an inward work -- a heart governed by the new nature, walking in dependence upon God.

Earthly, Natural, Devilish Wisdom

Verse 15 describes the wisdom that is not from above as earthly, natural, and devilish -- Kelly translates the last word 'demoniacal.' These three words are an ascending scale of condemnation. Earthly: it belongs to this present world and has no reference to God. Natural: it belongs to the unregenerate man. Demoniacal: it is, in its ultimate inspiration, from below.

One might think of the mainstream culture and the counter-culture of the world as opposites, but in this analysis they are the same: both earthly, both natural, both of a piece. Two parties in vigorous opposition to each other, yet both described by the same three words. The Christian has nothing to do with either; his citizenship is in heaven, and he looks for his Savior to come from there.

Divine Order: First Pure, Then Peaceable

Verse 17 has been observed to contain a principle of the greatest importance: 'The wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable.' The world reverses this. It says: peace is what matters; let us have peace, and purity can be settled later. But God does not allow it to work that way. There is no peace, saith God, to the wicked. Peace that is built on a compromise of purity is not real peace; it is a semblance of peace, a breathing space before the next eruption. The enemy himself does not want peace; he wants to advance his own ends, and he is well pleased to use the language of peace to do it.

This principle appears throughout Scripture. Melchizedek is described in Hebrews 7 as 'first, being by interpretation king of righteousness, and then also king of Salem, which is king of peace.' Righteousness first, then peace -- that is the divine order impressed on Scripture from front to back. The Son of Righteousness must arise with healing in His wings before Jerusalem -- the city of peace -- can have her peace. Peace for Israel waits upon their receiving the verdict against themselves and acknowledging their sin. Not before. Zechariah's word to the remnant was: 'Love ye truth and peace' -- with truth coming first.

Mordecai's letters to confirm the feast of Purim were 'words of peace and truth' -- even there the order holds.

After purity and peace, the wisdom from above is gentle, yielding, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. These are its characteristics, and they are beautiful. The fruit of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace -- but by those who first maintained purity.

The Poor Wise Man

It is remarkable that this chapter, full of little things -- the tongue, the bit, the rudder, the small fire, the little fountain -- closes with wisdom that is from above. That is not little at all. It is something of profound and deep character, something that brings honor and glory to God. We should not treat lightly what we say, carelessly letting fall whatever our hearts may will. But we should take encouragement from this chapter: the wisdom from above, with all its beauty, is available to us.

In Ecclesiastes there is a little city besieged by a great king, and in it a poor wise man, and by his wisdom he delivered the city. Yet no man remembered him. That poor wise man, forgotten and unremembered, stands as a type of the one who has stood under us in wisdom and delivered us -- the Lord Jesus Christ, despised and rejected of men. He is worthy of all our remembrance and all our praise.

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Lord willing.