

James 3:1-12 – “Words Unto Good Works”

Before we get started, I want to take a couple of minutes to summarize some of the main points James has been making in his first two chapters that we have heard over the last month.

The first – and main point – is Christ. We know it is our faith in Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory, that is a living faith, given to us by grace. He reminds his readers that we are brought forth – or birthed – by the word of truth to be like him, and he is able to save your souls. He also prefaces his entire epistle, marking himself as completely under the dominion of the Lord Jesus Christ – a slave, if you want to get literal of Christ. He is marking himself as owned by Christ, not by the world, and everything should be read in this context.

We’ve also seen what faith that is NOT in Jesus Christ looks like. The man who looks in the mirror – who looks to man as the guarantor or surety of life and joy – is working with bad faith, dead faith, which produces no good work. The faith in Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory, on the other hand is a living faith that produces works done for his glory in service to one another.

And we’ve seen encouragement unto joy as we work for Christ in service to one another, being doers of the word and not just hearers, bringing joy to others through ministry, and to ourselves in obedience to the perfect law of liberty.

So as we look into James 3, it appears once again there is an abrupt transition into a brand new and unrelated subject. But is it?

In James 2, we just finished hearing about faith – which, like the concept of justice, is so simple. Every child knows what is and isn’t fair, and are quick to remind whoever will listen when an injustice has been perceived. Similarly, every child from birth instinctually places his or her faith in the mother for food, warmth, comfort, and joy.

But justice is also very complex, and requires years of training in order to be qualified to administer it publicly. Justice is easily perverted by corruption and apathy, and we are very careful – in theory – to determine not only who administers justice, but who makes laws and executes them.

The concept of faith, in a way, is similarly complex – prone to corruption, perversion, distortion, or even apathy. Having just finished his exhortation on faith and works, it’s almost as if James paused, took a deep breath to let his previous sentence settle and then continued: “For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also is faith without works dead.....<breathe>.....Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”

James is warning his brothers that this topic of faith and works – while understood with a childlike simplicity – can be dangerous. I don’t know what all was going on in James’s context, but to illustrate how dangerous this topic can be – and why we must expect

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teachers of faith to be experts in the Bible – I want to bring up a movement within Christianity that did much harm, and it was all within its conversation about faith and works.

It's not a fringe movement either, it was and is very well known. The “Carnal Christian” movement says that by trusting in Christ as savior, by saying the sinner's prayer, a person can become and continue to be a true Christian, even if he never manifests any Christ-like qualities of neighborly love. The Carnal Christian, according to Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade, is “one who has received Christ, but who lives in defeat because he is trying to live the Christian life in his own strength. Jesus is IN the life, but not on the throne. SELF is on the throne, directing decisions and actions...and often resulting in frustration.”¹

Now, I don't know if Dr. Bright meant to imply that one could go through the motions of saying a formulaic prayer, motivated by streets of gold and escape from eternal pain, and then God would be obligated to save you. I don't know if that was what he meant to imply – but people definitely inferred that, and preachers began emphasizing the sinner's prayer as the means of salvation, almost to the point of incantation. Tracts with prayers on it left as tips for waitresses, as if to imply the recitation alone would be enough to save you. Surveying 20th Century Church History, we saw a loud emphasis on numbers, on tally marks, of people that “got saved” because they went through the motions of walking down the aisle or raising their hands with every head bowed and every eye closed.

The consequence of a “salvation” that allows the Self to be on the throne has been, at a minimum, huge numbers of people confused about the sovereignty of God, the ability of the “self,” and the synergy of faith and works. At worst, it has caused anxiety unto suicide. Some have very-publicly apostatized from the church to the world, and encouraged others to do so.

I'm not saying that no person who responded to an altar call or said the Sinner's Prayer is a real Christian – not at all. But it is wrong for **teachers** to treat salvation as a competition within a volume-driven business model. It is wrong to suggest to souls that an incantation can obligate God to upgrade your eternal destiny. It is wrong to treat the subject of faith in a way that makes man the victor, not Christ.

Maybe James was discovering this same kind of “easy believism” in the First Century being spread in the church, which is why he is emphatic on showing that justification by faith is not just a one-time “set it and forget it” act, but will yield a justification that is sensitive to the law of God, moved unto good works to one another, and is rested and grounded in Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory, not in the incantation you recited.

¹ <https://www.cru.org/us/en/train-and-grow/spiritual-growth/the-spirit-filled-life.html> (accessed October 9, 2021)

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“Not many of you should become teachers my brothers...”

Pastors, Preachers, Teachers must be held to a higher standard. Spiritual doctors need to be experts in their field that demands rigorous training and education. We expect that of our physical doctors. Lawyers are expected to be expertly trained in the law and justice; we should expect nothing less from our spiritual counselor.

Please don't misunderstand, I'm not touting Academic Credentials as the only criteria, or even the first criteria, for measuring a good pastor, preacher, teacher. What I am saying is that teaching the spiritual truths found in God's Word is a serious matter and can have serious consequences. Like doctors, spiritual teachers can just as easily become dangerous instruments to their patients as they can instruments of health.

Now, while ministers of the gospel are principally what James has in his words here, it is not ONLY ministers of the gospel he has in mind. All of us are teachers in some form or fashion. It was a common expression in the Marine Corps to learn whatever you could from all types of leadership – what to imitate and much as what NOT to imitate. James is warning his entire audience – not just formal teachers – of the dangers of how we speak about things. Perhaps he did have in mind something about faith and works; but his warning is universal. There is not just a warning in James 3, which is easy to see, but there is also an encouragement, which is more implicit, but important.

James has warned us previously about our speech, but here he re-emphasizes how such a little thing can have such major consequences – from the bit in a horse's mouth that is used to control a 1,000 pound animal; to the rudders on ships used to steer massive vessels and all their cargo.

Our words, James says, have the effect of steering our own direction – whether into an iceberg, or into safe harbor; whether into the stable or into a pit. This is sobering, but it's true, and it's a hard instrument to master. It's not just in what we initiate in our words, but in our response, and in our response to responses, and in our response to responses to responses. And it's hard to stop an offense from growing once it's started. The less careful we are in meaning to understand what another means to be understood, the more likely we are to jerk the bridle and send the horse into a frenzied state, the more likely we are to steer the ship into the reef.

Using words can be so destructive, and bad speech is likened to fire not just in James, but in Proverbs 16:27. Fire is destructive, it is painful, it is hard to control. And like bad speech, it can get started by negligence, lack of care, lack of preventative measures, OR it can get started deliberately. I can't say I know anyone personally like this now, but I have known in the past what can only be described as speech arsonists – people who would habitually and deliberately provoke another, or slander and gossip about another, for the sole purpose of watching the fire spread. You can find these types of people

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fairly easily on Social Media. It's not just anonymous trolls on Twitter though. There are speech arsonists in our kids' schools, who ignite the fire through cyberbullying, sometimes with fatal consequences.

So James then begins to really drive the point home about just how dangerous language is, and – as if to prove his point – using some of the sharpest, most incisive rhetorical devices, such as hyperbole,² personification,³ zoomorphism,⁴ metaphor, ominatio, or declarations of evil, contrast, and contradiction.⁵ When James calls the tongue a “restless evil” it's not like he's describing “Restless Leg Syndrome.” The word has implications of frenzied, anarchic unruliness; mental illness or demonic possession even.⁶ Berserk, if that word is used anymore.

So how are we to respond to such a warning? Again, the introvert in me would solve the problem, by taking this to heart, and committing to have as little human interaction as possible, cloistering myself away in my own home.

But that is not what we are called to do. We are called unto fellowship with one another.

Nestled in this sea of rhetorical warnings, there is a light of hope: “with our tongues we bless our Lord and Father.” And although James immediately follows this up with, “and with our tongues we also curse God's image bearers,” James does not deny this good work the tongue is doing. And it is a really good work.

When we “Bless the Lord” we are consciously, totally, and deliberately giving him honor, esteem, and ultimate priority. In Psalm 103, David says, “Bless the LORD, O my soul, Bless his holy name, all that is within me.” Brothers and sisters, if our tongues can't do anything else good, they can at least do this. This is one reason why we sing the Doxology every worship service – we use words to lift our hearts, mind, and strength unto the glory and praise of God. When we are come together in the house of God, we should be confronted with the majesty and holiness of our host, and express unto him our adoration.

What James is implying here is, yes, the tongue is capable of great evil, and we should always be conscious of that. But it is also capable of great good. But using the tongue for good is grounded in blessing God – remembering our humble station in relationship to his perfect holiness, whose mercy has been poured out upon us, calling us out of our estate of sin and misery, and into a state of eternal salvation as his children. This will humble the tongue; no human being can tame the tongue, but God the Holy Spirit can

² Tongues are not literally “set on fire by hell,” but they are empowered unto righteousness by the work of the devil. (v.6)

³ The tongue being set or appointed among the members of the body (v.6)

⁴ Ascribing to the tongue a beastly wildness that is more savage than any other animal in vv. 7-8

⁵ From the same mouth come blessing and cursing... Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? (vv. 10-11)

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and does through our process of sanctification. “Death and Life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit.” Proverbs 18.⁷

Psalm 37 tells us, “The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom, and his tongue speaks justice. The law of God is in his heart; his steps do not slip.”⁸ Psalm 119: “My tongue will sing of your word, for all your commandments are right.”⁹

The prescription for our words to be righteous, is to meditate on him and HIS words to us. Being justified by faith in THE WORD of LIFE, THE IMPLANTED WORD, JESUS CHRIST, the LORD OF GLORY, our tongues may be righteous.

And as we heard from Proverbs in our Old Testament Reading, “The tongue of the righteous is choice silver; the lips of the righteous feed many; the BLESSING OF THE LORD makes Rich; The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom, the lips of the righteous know what is acceptable.”

We CAN use our words for good works, brothers and sisters, because we have received by faith that perfect GOOD WORD, who was made flesh and dwelt among us, bore our iniquities, and imputed unto us all HIS good works. Encourage one another unto joy and unto holiness. Promote righteousness to one another.

Finally, a righteous tongue is not necessarily silent in the face of unrighteousness. A righteous tongue may be zealous to promote and defend righteousness. Proverbs 28:23: “The one who rebukes or reproveth a man will find more favor than he who flatters with the tongue.” In Isaiah, God promises his bride, the church, no weapon that is fashioned against you shall succeed, and you shall confute every tongue that rises against you in judgment.”¹⁰

We are not to be passive in our promotion and defense of the Holiness of God, and that includes his Holy Moral Law. Jesus was not timid when rebuked the pharisees and the scribes, pronouncing Woes! Upon them. He zealously defended the holiness of God when he chased the moneylenders out of the temple.¹¹

But, again, Jesus was the consummate teacher. And we should remember the caution, “not many of you should be teachers” before everyone thinks it is wise to start overturning coffeeshops set up in the foyers of other churches. But though many of us are not called for public teaching and rebuke, we all should be zealous to promote and defend righteousness in our personal capacity. It is a good work to bless God by defending His Holiness and His Holy Word.

⁷ Proverbs 18:21

⁸ Psalm 37:29-30, see also Psalm 51:14, Psalm 71:24

⁹ Psalm 119:172

¹⁰ Isaiah 54:17

¹¹ John 2:13-17, see esp. v. 17.

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Brothers and sisters, we have been warned emphatically by James how dangerous language is, but in Christ, our language may be beautiful and glorifying to God, and encouraging to one another. But we can also be encouraged in ourselves. In Christ, as we see in Philippians 2, we have the fulfillment of Isaiah 45: “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn; from **my mouth** has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not be turned back, or repented: ‘To me every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall swear allegiance.’ Only in the LORD, it shall be said of me, are righteousness and strength; to him shall come and be ashamed all who were incensed against him. In the LORD all the offspring of Israel shall be justified and shall glory.”¹²

This is God’s promise to us from his mouth. May we as the church, the offspring of Israel, give praise with our mouths to Jesus Christ our Lord, encourage one another unto joy in this promise, and embrace this promise in our daily lives.

¹² Isaiah 45:22-25