

The Life of Faith, Part 8, A Study in James: Self-Control

James 1 began a discussion on God-given wisdom. James 3:1–12 begins a new discussion on God-given wisdom. We are being shown how to manifest God-given wisdom in the manner we influence others, how to control our speech, and how to live right.

In James 3:1 we are shown our awesome responsibility of influencing others.

James 3:1 NKJV My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.

It is my belief that this verse refers to two distinct groups of believers.

The first group is obviously everyone who aspires to teach or influence the Christian community.

We can see the impact of the Rabbinical school of influence in this encouragement. During Christ's time, scribes and Pharisees loved to be called Rabbi. As their influence over their students grew, these Rabbis gained esteem in the religious community. Jesus said, "Do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren." (Matthew 23:5-8)

As the church progressed and the five-fold ministry gifts of the Spirit were introduced, the role of teaching became prevalent in the church, (Ephesians 4:11). To one degree or another each of these five gifts involves the ministry of teaching. James does not appear to be addressing these five-fold ministry gifts that are given by the Holy Spirit. In no way is James discouraging the free exercise of that gift and calling. It appears that this verse is talking about our influence over other believers.

In Luke 12:48, Jesus said, "For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required." This is the same message that James is giving. Anyone in a place of leadership or influence will be held to a higher standard of excellence or faithfulness.

The second group involves everyone who has influence over others.

Who has had influence over your life? I think of several individuals. Some were ministers or pastors, but most were people who never taught a class or stood behind a pulpit. In some ways, this is unavoidable influence over others. We all have influence whether we aspire to do it or not. Many people reproduce themselves in the lives of those they influence whether that be to excellence or mediocrity. Within this group are individuals who seek to tell others how they should live or what they should do.

Since James is addressing self-control and taming the tongue, it appears that this group should heed this warning. Anyone who aspires to influence another must pay close attention to their own example. Those who instruct others must keep control of their tongue.

Regardless of our calling or influence over others, we all must recognize our responsibility to live an exemplary life. Christ's words should be a controlling factor in our lives. He said, "To whom much is given, much is required." The Apostle Paul said, "So then each of us shall give account of himself to God." (Romans 14:12),

How to control your tongue.

James 3:2-12 NKJV For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a

very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.

How to control your tongue.

James shares several things that reveal the seemingly impossible task of controlling the tongue. This text strongly says “no one can tame the tongue.”

James 3:2 said we all offend, stumble, and make many mistakes.

Everyone offends, stumbles, and makes mistakes. Romans 3:23 tells us, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” James said we stumble and offend in many things. This is not just an occasional fall and sin. We all are always coming up short before God.

The words of our mouth demonstrate what we really are.

What does your tongue reveal about you? Have you paid attention to the words that you speak? Do you speak faith or doubt? Do you speak hatred or love? Do you speak kindness or judgment? What does your tongue reveal about you? Our tongue always shows what we really are.

Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The tongue is a gauge and it also defiles the whole body. Just as a rudder affects a ship and a bit controls a horse, the tongue affects the whole body. James said, ‘the tongue sets on fire the entire course of one’s life,’ (vs. 6).

An out of control tongue has been set on fire by hell. It is unruly and full of deadly poison, (vs. 8). From our tongue proceeds blessing and cursing, (vs. 10). James concludes this section by saying, “These things ought not to be so.” (vs 10)

So how can we control our tongue?

James is drawing us to God. If we follow our own inclinations, we will fail.

2 Corinthians 10:3-5 NKJV For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ,

Since the tongue or the words of our mouth are so powerful, we must bring every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.

Ephesians 4:31 NKJV Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice.

1 Peter 2:1 NKJV Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking,

What kind of evil can God conquer? Do you believe that God can make you a conqueror over Satan and the power of sin?

Romans 8:37 NKJV Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

With God's help, we can conquer every addiction. He can solve all behavioral problems. He can conquer a sensual and lustful lifestyle. The Lord is no less able to control the lying, blaspheming, slanderous, gossiping tongue.

No man can tame the tongue without supernatural grace and assistance. James is not saying the tongue is impossible to control. He is simply saying we need God's help to conquer these things. The tongue is so unruly, unstable, uneasy, and restless that it is capable of anything.

The believer's tongue must be controlled.

James asks, "can a spring send forth fresh and bitter water?" It is not fitting for a believer's mouth to give out blessing and cursing, bitter and sweet. Our mouths should bring forth evidence of what has happened within us.

Since God is the source of everything that is good, He is able to help us in every situation. If God can save the darkest sinner's soul, He can change the believer's tongue. It is contrary to the nature of believers to have an untamed tongue.

The words of our mouths are a testimony of God's abiding presence within us. The God Who is perfect and almighty is able to control our lives and our tongues. If God is able to save us from the vilest of sins, He is able to purify our innermost being and change the fountain of the words of our mouths. When we truly surrender to His control, God will manifest Himself through our lives. Our new life in Christ is under the power and control of the Holy Spirit, Who gives us the victory. We are made more than conquerors through Him who loved us, (Romans 8:37). By connecting us to Christ and giving us this new life, God has made us witnesses or living examples of His power and glory.

James continues to demonstrate the life of faith is controlled by wisdom from above.

Since God has made each of us witnesses of His glory by saving our souls, His power should manifest this wisdom from above. This wisdom is not just moral insight or skill, it is a Christ-controlled life. Our conduct demonstrates who is in control.

James 3:13-18 NKJV Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Where does this true wisdom come from?

James says it is from above and not of this world. James contrasts heavenly wisdom and the wisdom that does not descend from above, (James 3:13-18). Earthly wisdom is controlled by a self-seeking and evil heart.

According to James 3:15, there are three sources of wisdom that is not from above.

- First, it is earthly or from the worldly mind and system.

- Second, it is sensual or originating in the unregenerate and natural mind. Jude 19 says, “Sensual persons cause divisions, not having the Spirit.”
- Third, earthly wisdom is demonic.

When our lives are controlled by earthly wisdom, we manifest the fruit and inconsistency of the source of it. The sweet and pure fruit of the Spirit will be absent and evil thoughts and imaginations take control. People of faith have no common ground with earthly wisdom. Heavenly wisdom is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good deeds or fruit.

Our lives will demonstrate the work of Christ, the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, and God’s character. Since God is Lord and Master, our new life of faith will manifest God’s nature and character.

The Epistle of James reveals the true nature of the life of faith. Our lives are radically changed when Christ Jesus becomes our Lord and Savior. We must not only invite Jesus to be our Savior from our sins, we must allow Him in to cleanse and change our heart.