

THE LETTER OF JAMES – PART 4

SPEECH, WISDOM, AND PRAYER

I. Chapter 3 then turns from the overall theme that good works are essential to faith to a specific application with regard to speech. This section uses a rapid succession of vivid analogies in making the point.

A. The first verse transitions to that theme by saying that not many of the faithful should be teachers, for teachers will be judged by a higher standard.

1. There seemed to be a specific office of teachers in the early church, and they were highly regarded. See Acts 13:1; 1 Cor. 12:29; Eph. 4:11; see also Didache 13:2, 15:1-2. Jesus had warned against calling people teachers in the absolute sense, see Matt. 23:8, for there is finally only one teacher. Teachers in the Christians faith participate in Jesus' teaching office.

- Jesus had emphasized the importance of teaching regarding the commandments and the great good or evil that comes from doing so faithfully or unfaithfully. See Mat. 5:19. He also strongly denounced the scribes and Pharisees for their poor example, although they still had a legitimate teaching office. See Matt. 23.

2. James likewise warns against the faithful being teachers too easily, for if their actions are poor, they will give bad example and lead the faithful astray, incurring judgment upon themselves.

3. St. James then point out that all people fail often. This common failure is a theme in both Jewish wisdom literature, see Job 4:17; Ps. 14:3; Prov. 20:6; Ecc. 7:20; Sir. 19:15, and in the New Testament epistles, see Rom. 3:9-20; 1 John 1:8-10. In Jesus we are forgiven and made pure. See Rom. 3:21-26; 1 John 1:7, 9. But, St. James warns, there is still a greater judgment for teachers when they fall short, and thus one should be careful about taking that office on or conferring it on another.

B. St. James then transitions into the theme of the importance of speech by applying this overall principle that people often fail to sins of speech in particular, saying that such sins are particularly hard to control.

1. He says (obviously as a general principle, not necessarily true in every single case) that it is so difficult to avoid sinning in speech that, if one can avoid that sin, is perfect able to control all desires. The frequency of sins in speech was also a common theme in Jewish Wisdom literature. See Sir. 19:15; Prov. 13:3, 21:23. There was also many proverbs and advice about when to speak or be silent, most often warning against speaking rashly. See Prov. 10:10-11, 18-21, 15:1-7 16:27-28, 18:7-9; Sir. 5:11-6:1; 20:1-7, 22:24-23:15, 28:8-26.

2. The image he gives is that one in control of his speech is like one who perfectly controls an animal (and his life in general) with a bridle. Such a man is perfect, fulfilling Jesus' call to perfection. See Matt. 5:48, 19:21; see also Ps. 15:1; 1 Pet. 1:13-16. James earlier called for perfection through perfect perseverance, and now calls for perfection through control of desires.

- Plato in *The Republic* had described most desires as beasts, and the desire for honor and wealth as a lion. He said that the just man is in control of these animals, whereas others are either controlled by the lion, or controlled by the many beasts who destroy each other. See *The Republic* Book IX, sections 588-590. St. James is likewise comparing speech to a powerful animal that must be controlled.

C. Then building on a similar image of one's life as an unruly horse (St. Gregory the Great and St. Francis would compare the body to a donkey), St. James says that controlling speech is crucial to controlling the animal, as a bit on the mouth is crucial to controlling one's life.

- The letter then draws a similar analogy to the rudder of a ship controlling the whole ship in the midst of storms, which could represent the storms of this life, or the storms of desire and temptation. See 2 Sam. 22:17; Ps. 144:7; 2 Pet. 2:17; Jude 12.

- The boasting of great things could be because of the rightful control under God, see 2 Cor. 10:12-18; Phil 2:16, but also can be seen in the negative light of boasting in a haughty fashion. See, e.g., Ps. 75:5; Sir. 28:18; 2 Mac. 15:32. If seen in the latter way, this negative assessment is a lead into the next analogies of the tongue to a fire and a serpent.

D. The letter then compares ill speech to a fire that can burn a whole forest.

1. The Old Testament frequently uses this image of the tongue to a flame. See Ps. 39:4; Prov. 16:27. The Book of Sirach

especially develops this and other imagery regarding malicious speech. See Sir. 28:12-26.

2. The power of God is also sometimes compared to a fire. See Is. 10:17, 30:27; Jer. 23:29; Mal. 3:2. Likewise, Jesus and John the Baptist spoke of fire coming from heaven to cleanse the world from sins and send forth the power of God. See Matt. 3:11; Mark 9:49; Luke 3:16, 12:49; see also Heb. 12:29; 2 Pet. 3:10. At Pentecost, tongues of flame came to rest on the disciples, indicating their ability to speak with the fire of heaven.

3. Here, by contrast, the destructive tongue acts with great power, but not in tune with God. It can defile the whole body, as Jesus had said before. See Matt. 15:16-20; Mark 7:20-22. And the unbridled tongue will destroy the whole "wheel of existence" by the force of "the fires of Gehenna." The latter two phrases combine a common Greek pagan cultic expression, describing the whole of creation, with a popular Jewish image of hell. See Matt. 5:22-30, 10:28, 18:9, 23:15, 33; Mark 9:45-57; Luke 12:15. St. James may be emphasizing that undisciplined speech involves a departure from faith as much as pagan worship and incurs the harshest punishments.

E. The letter then picks up again the allegory of animals, saying that controlling animals is easy compared to controlling speech.

1. Even in the classical world, people marveled at the control of mankind over nature, and the religious gave God thanks for it. See, e.g., Ps. 8:7; Wis. 9:2.

2. Perhaps recalling the idyllic scene of the Garden of Eden, the letter compares temptation of speech as a serpent, full of poison. Psalm 140 had drawn a similar comparison in the context of praying for protection from enemies. The letter here calls for guarding against sins

F. The letter then concludes this discourse on speech by commenting on the contradiction of using speech for both good and ill.

1. It points out that, with speech, we bless God our Father and yet speak ill of people whom He has created in His likeness.

2. The phrase the Lord and Father is not common, but was used in the Book of Sirach in the context of a prayer for control over speech, near the beginning of its most lengthy warning against rash speech. See Sir. 23:1, 4; see also Is. 63:16 (using the term Lord and Father of Israel in the context of a prayer for deliverance from sins and enemies.) Given

the rarity of the expression, this letter may well be using the phrase "Lord and Father" to cross reference this passage in Sirach.

3. Tapping into a theme he will get to again, St. James condemns the cursing or judging of others, see also James 4:11-12, 5:9-11, 19-20, saying that all people are still created in God's likeness. Genesis had said that we were originally made in God's image and likeness. See Gen. 1:26. After the fall, God reaffirmed that we are in His image, but did not say we are in His likeness. See Gen. 9:6; see also Sir. 17:1

- Commentators frequently draw the conclusion that, through sin we lost the likeness of God (e.g., the perfect justice, freedom from corruption and death), but are still in His image, for we have free will, intellect, and the ability to pray, and with them the call to holiness. See Catechism 705.

- In affirming that our fellow man is now also in God's likeness, James may now be referring to the fact that Jesus has restored that grace and friendship with God that was there at the beginning. In a similar fashion Jesus had already replaced older ideas that had allowed for hatred of enemies with a new law of love, recognizing that God calls all people to holiness. See Matt. 5:43-48.

- In any case, St. James is indicating that, it is inconsistent to pretend to be serving God while cursing those very one's God has given to serve Him in His image. See, e. g, Matt. 22:34-40; 1 John 3:14-18, 4:20-21.

4. Again using vivid imagery, the letter says that one cannot really be praising God and giving Him worship if one is simultaneously cursing God's children with the same speech.

- The prophets had likewise condemned empty worship that did not include a reformation of deeds. See, e.g., Is. 1:11-16, 58:1-5; Jer. 11:15-17; Zech. 7:1-7; Sir. 34:18-26.

- St. James is also building on the good and bad tree image Jesus had drawn for judging teachers and one's life, see Matt. 7:15-20, 12:33, Luke 6:43, and applies it to judging the value of one's praise of God. The prophets had also spoken of charity as a necessary background to true worship. See Is. 58:6-14; Zech. 7:8-14; Sir. 35.

- He also adds image of a spring, which either yields fresh either pure or brackish water, indicating that either one's

worship will be pure and life charitable, or worship and life both tainted. The image that salt water cannot produce fresh water could mean either that true worship cannot lead to a lack of charity, or that a lack of charity cannot lead to pure worship, or both.

- Ezekiel had spoken of the fresh waters from the temple cleansing all lands even to the Dead Sea, reflecting God's grace cleansing all nations. See Ez. 37. Likewise, the grace of God makes one's life a pure stream and fruitful land around it.

II. Coming back to the theme of the importance of good works, St. James now insists that true wisdom and understanding is shown in good works.

A. Wisdom and understanding ranked at the highest of the intellectual gifts among both the Jews and Greeks. See, e.g., Is. 11:2; Wis. 7:6-8:21; Sir. 1:1-18, 4:11-19.; 1 Cor. 1:22 Wisdom, in Jewish thought, was the ability to comprehend the whole of creation together. See, e.g., Prov. 3:13-35, 8:22-36. St. Thomas says that it is the ability to judge all things through a certain connection and life with God. See St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica II-II q. 45 art 2, 3. Understanding was more the ability to perceive the meaning of teachings and insights, in St. Thomas Aquinas' words, the ability "to grasp the things that are proposed, and to penetrate into the very heart." See, e.g., Is. 6:9, 40:21; Dan. 1:17, 2:20; Mark 4:10-13, 7:17-23; Summa Theologica II-II q. 8, art. 7 c.

- However, there could be a certain arrogance and self-contentedness associated with what people perceived as wisdom, as with the scribes and Pharisees or with the Roman god and goddess Apollo and Athena.

B. Jesus had spoken of God as revealing His mysteries to the simple and not to the wise of this world. See Matt. 11:25. St. Paul described the wisdom of the cross, which turns worldly wisdom upside down, for it leads one to reject the glory and wealth the world offers to join with the higher wisdom of Jesus Christ and His Cross. See 1 Cor. 1:19-25, 2:6-16. He had also described true wisdom as leading to a life "worthy of the Lord." See Col. 1:9-12, 28.

C. St. James likewise describes true wisdom as humble and showing forth itself in good works.

1. Along the same lines as he has previously said that true faith must show itself in works, so now he describes wisdom in the same way, adding that humility also comes from wisdom.

2. Wisdom had always been understood as bringing humility before God. See Prov. 3:3-8; Wis. 9:1-18; Sir. 1:18. St. James also argues that it brings about a humility that creates harmony among men, rather than jealousy over place and honor. Cf. Mark 9:33-37; Eph. 4:1-5; Sir. 3:17-28.

D. The letter then turns to the opposite effects that come, not from God, but from a wisdom of the world or worse.

1. The letter warns that if there is jealousy and ambition, that is cause not for boasting but rather for repentance. See 1 Cor. 1:1-17. To boast about one's ambition would be false, pride claiming to be from God. Galatians likewise describes the fruits of living according to the flesh. See Gal. 5:19-21.

2. The letter implies that the worldly desires for advancement and prestige that lead to jealousy and selfish ambition may involve a certain kind of wisdom, insofar as one may know how to carry out one's designs. However, such wisdom is condemned as "earthly, unspiritual, demonic."

- Earthly wisdom is itself neutral, belonging to the earth, and therefore, subject to death, but not evil in itself unless sought as the highest end. See John 3:12; 1 Cor. 15:40, 2 Cor. 5:1 (referring to our current body as earthly); Phil 3:19.

- Unspiritual is worse, for it implies a seeking of worldly things above all, with no understanding of the spiritual. See 1 Cor. 2:14; Jude 19.

- Worst of all is the demonic wisdom, which is in the end behind all of these jealousies and selfish ambitions. The idea is that, when such things abound, although the people involved may think of themselves as worshipping God, they are really being manipulated by the demons. Cf. John 8:44-47; Acts 13:9-10.

- This negative progression implies that, if one abandons the true wisdom of the Cross one eventually descends into the merely earthly, subject to death, and then to the positively unspiritual and in the end serves the demonic. There is no merely neutral ground.

E. The letter then returns to the theme that true wisdom from above, listing seven signs of such wisdom, and concluding with the

peace that comes from it.

1. The list begins with the fact that this wisdom is pure, unsullied by earthly desires or ambitions. See Ps. 15:1, 24:4, 73:1; Matt. 5:8; Rev. 21:7. In ancient Jewish worship, one had to be ritually pure in order to enter into worship and the presence of God. This wisdom from above makes one spiritually pure and thus able to give that fitting praise of God that the earlier part of the chapter referred to.

2. The letter then describes three aspects that counter the bitter jealousy and selfish ambition described before: being peaceable, gentle, compliant.

- Peacefulness is a virtue attributed to wisdom in the Book of Proverbs, which is a part of the calm happiness given to the virtuous. See Prov. 3:16-18; see also Heb. 12:11 (describing the peacefulness that comes after accepting the discipline of the Lord.)

- Gentleness, as described in the Old Testament means a calmness, and desire to rule with compassion and a willingness to forgive sins for the sake of improving another. See Ps. 86; Phil 4:5; 1 Tim. 3:3; Titus 3:2.

- Compliance means an openness to the guidance of God, and of His wisdom given from above.

3. The next four results of wisdom from above have two negative and two positive aspects.

- The positive aspects are being full of mercy and good fruits. Mercy is a common attribute of God in healing from sin and illness and protection from enemies, and being full of mercy implies sharing in God's mission. See Ps. 136

- Fruitfulness is the rightful result of being in the justice of God. See John 15:1-6; Ps. 1:3, 128:3-4.

- Without inconstancy implies an impartiality, a judgment according to the never-changing justice of God.

- Without insincerity means a wholeheartedness, without reservations. The New Testament epistles use this term in referring to complete faith and love. See Rom. 12:9, 2 Cor. 6:6; 1 Tim 1:5; 2 Tim. 1:5; 1 Pet. 1:22.

4. This section concludes with the image of reaping what one sows. The idea is that if people act with wisdom in a peaceful fashion, they can expect the results to be peaceful; acting, by implied contrast, with jealousy and selfish ambition, can be expected to lead to strife.