

*The unfolding of your words gives light.*

## Faith That Works

### *An Exposition of the Book of James*

<sup>1</sup>Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren<sup>a</sup>, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment<sup>b</sup>. <sup>2</sup>For we all stumble in many ways<sup>c</sup>. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man<sup>d</sup>, able to bridle the whole body as well<sup>e</sup>. <sup>3</sup>Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well<sup>f</sup>. <sup>4</sup>Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are

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<sup>a</sup> **3:1 Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren.** We have switched from talking about the display of genuine faith to the way we use our tongues. This is really no shift in thought at all. James is not saying speaking of the expected role of “teacher” that every mature believer must have with children and younger believers. That kind of instruction is essential rather than optional. James is likely talking about the public teaching role that rabbis and pastors or Bible teachers have. Almost every New Testament use of this word refers to Jesus or a prominent teacher.

The warning is likely to those who have lots of words to share—good or bad—and think that qualifies them to assume the role of teacher. There are good reasons to hesitate before pursuing this title. Paul says the office of overseer is a fine thing to desire (1 Timothy 3:1), but that new converts should be kept from the office because of the danger of pride (1 Timothy 3:6). James is about to give the reason for his warning.

<sup>b</sup> **3:1 knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.** Notice the “we.” James considers himself one of the teachers warned. This statement could refer to human judgment, since James has just been talking about showing our faith to men. More likely the common interpretation is correct, that this is a reference to God’s judgment being stricter on those who teach the Bible. To misrepresent the Scriptures is to get in the way of God’s message. Jesus said that we will all one day give an account for every careless word we say.

But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. Matthew 12:36

<sup>c</sup> **3:2 For we all stumble in many ways.** This is a humble admission by James that should put to rest any ideas that entire sanctification is possible in this life. Once again the reader is left wondering what hope there is for change that can only come down from the Father of lights, the giver of all good (James 1:17).

<sup>d</sup> **3:2 If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man.** Remember that the New Testament word “perfect” does not refer to sinlessness (see the previous phrase). This could be translated “a complete husband.” Single ladies looking for “Mr. Right” would do well to pay attention to the way potential suitors use their tongues.

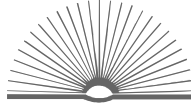
<sup>e</sup> **3:2 able to bridle the whole body as well.** This is a picturesque phrase, another in a new string of metaphors in James.

<sup>f</sup> **3:3 Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well.** A piece of metal strategically placed inside the mouth of a 2000 pound animal can make it do things it would never volunteer to do on its own.

James 3.01-05a  
Steven Svendsen, Sr.

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still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires<sup>a</sup>. <sup>5</sup>So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things<sup>b,c</sup>

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<sup>a</sup> 3:4 **Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires.** Notice the emphasis on the smallness of the rudder and the desire of the pilot.

<sup>b</sup> 3:5 **So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things.** The word translated “boasts” was commonly used of things growing. Just as you might leave home for a week or two and return to find your garden plants (and weeds) significantly larger, the tongue is also capable of big surprises. This is similar to a comparison in Proverbs:

Four things on earth are small, yet they are extremely wise: Ants are creatures of little strength, yet they store up their food in the summer; coney are creatures of little power, yet they make their home in the crags; locusts have no king, yet they advance together in ranks; a lizard can be caught with the hand, yet it is found in kings' palaces. Proverbs 30:24-28

Three small things are mentioned here that make big things happen: bits, rudders and tongues. The tongue is not just a force for great evil (as the next verses will show us), it can also bring much good.

<sup>c</sup> 3:1-5a The challenge of the first verses of James 3 is not entirely negative. Knowing that the little tongue can do powerful things reminds you that there are very positive results when you use your tongue wisely. With your words you can proclaim how great is our God, express love, give instruction, share ideas and offer encouragement. But the negative warning to prospective teachers implies the great damage that can be done by the tongue. With your tongue you can blaspheme God, express hatred, rebel against authority, complain and criticize others. If you claim to follow our Savior your desire to please him will largely influence your tongue. With a force like that inside your own mouth, you should desire to bring it under his rule. Here are three truths from this text that should motivate you to control your tongue.

1. You are accountable for what comes out of your mouth. Words are not neutral. Some words may seem empty of meaning, but they are taking up space that could have been better used otherwise.
2. You cannot call yourself mature until you can control your tongue.
3. You will follow your tongue. This does not seem like the biblical view that says, “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” The tongue is not the same as the heart, but it is trained by the heart. You follow your tongue like a horse follows the bit and bridle. The truth of the situation is not that the bit and bridle are so powerful but that the horse is trained to follow them. Likewise your tongue.

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