

“Brief Meditation on the Wisdom of James 3” based on James 3
Delivered by Mallory Brown on Sept. 15, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

James 3 (Fresh Translation): Do not let many of you become teachers, my siblings, recognizing that we will receive greater judgment. For we all stumble much. If a certain one in what they say does not stumble, this one is a complete person, capable of bridling all their body.

Now, if we put bits into the mouths of horses for them to obey us, we can turn their whole bodies around. Look also at ships, being so vast and being driven by strong winds, they are turned around by a comparatively miniature rudder, wherever the impulse of the one steering intends. Thus, also the tongue is a small body part, and it boasts greatly. Look, a small fire kindles how great a forest. So also, the tongue is a fire, in the world of injustice. The tongue is set among our body parts defiling the whole body and igniting the course of nature, being that it is set on fire by hell.

For all kinds of beasts, and birds, and creeping things, and things of the sea are subdued and have been subdued by the nature of humanity. But as for the tongue, no one is able to subdue this among humanity. It is unruly, evil, and full of deadly poison.

With it, we bless our Lord and Father, and with it, we curse human beings, those who are made according to the likeness of God. From out of the same mouth proceeds forth good words and cursing.

My siblings, these things ought not to happen. From out of the same opening a spring does not pour forth both fresh and bitter. My siblings, a fig tree is not able to produce olives, nor a vine, figs, nor will a salt spring produce fresh water.

The one who is wise and understanding among you, let them show their works from out of their good behavior, in the humility of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and self-interest in your heart, do not boast and lie against the truth. This is not wisdom coming down from above, but earthly, unspiritual and demonic.

For where jealousy and self-interest exist, it will be unruly and there will be every evil deed. But wisdom from above is indeed first holy, then peaceful, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, nonprejudicial, and sincere. Then the fruit of justice is sown in peace by those making peace.

Scripture Meditation from Pastor Drew:

As we have learned in the first two weeks of this study, James was likely written in the lead up to a revolt in Judea. The writer is urging Christians of descent from the tribes of Israel not to seek Judean independence from Rome in ways that violate the faith of Jesus. Different factions were vying for influence over the people with words and arguments to justify their actions.

For us, much like the time in which James wrote this letter, we live in a time of great mistrust of authority and teachers. We judge our teachers and anyone who speaks publicly if they misspeak. The truth is that those who teach make a lot of mistakes, just like everyone else, except that these mistakes are public. Anyone who doesn't make a mistake must have complete or perfect control of every part of their body.

We all struggle to hold our tongues, and this limits our control of ourselves. It is hard to speak only good words, or blessings. In reality, we are all tempted and drawn to say things we shouldn't, and

sometimes our words are rash. If we could control what we say, we might be able to control our whole lives, just as a bridle controls a horse or a rudder controls a boat.

Instead, our tongues are more like small flames that start forest fires. James says then what is even more true today, namely that humanity has subdued the world. Today, there are far more domestic mammals and birds than there are wild animals and birds. We have no fear of the beasts of the sea, and we have exterminators to keep bugs out of our homes and businesses. It is easy to feel as if we control the natural world.

Yet the natural tongue in every person's mouth is still not fully controlled. It can be unruly, meaning it goes against the rules or order. It is evil, meaning it brings misery. Indeed, the tongue can be a deadly poison, meaning we can do a lot of damage with words and ideas.

When we judge others, we rob them of their status as image bearers of God and limit them to our image assigned to them. Likewise, when we curse these same image bearers, we wish for them to be apart from God's presence.

So it is that James says it should not be true that we can speak good words or bless and likewise, curse and damage, with the same tongue. James says that as hard it is, we must do better than this.

Our good works should be done in the humility of wisdom and come from out of our good behavior. We should not use good works to manipulate people, to strip them of their dignity, or in any way make us superior. It is good to give to the poor, but looking into a person's eyes, touching their hand, and treating them as an equal as we provide assistance – this is truly how good works should be done.

If we act because of jealousy or strong passions, or worse, out of self-interest, such as how others will praise us for our works, then such boasting is a lie against the truth. This is not God's wisdom. We should not do good works for our own advantage, but these gifts should be self-giving and sacrificial.

When giving is done for self-interest, it is unruly and goes against God's order. It causes more misery, which is evil. Instead, trusting in God's wisdom means our actions are holy, or set apart by God for a purpose. Our actions are then peaceful, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruit, without prejudice, and totally sincere.

This does not mean we refrain from doing good works, until we are confident our hearts are in it for the right reason. On the contrary, we show our faith by doing good works, but not for the praise and recognition of others. The truth is that when we act, it changes our thoughts. Our minds are not effective, on the other hand, in changing our actions. How often do we know what we believe is right, but struggle to do it?

The answer then may be to intentionally act, but do so anonymously and without fanfare, until our actions become second nature and reflect the self-giving love and humility of Jesus, who lived in our limits, died and rose for us. Our earlier reading from Isaiah's prophecy of the Suffering Servant points to the example of Jesus, who conquered sin and death, not by fighting fire with fire, but by humility, gentleness, patience and love.

If we want justice, James urges us to plant the seeds of justice in peace, as peacemakers, or mediators seeking wholeness and healing. The word translated in many bibles here as

“righteousness” is the Greek word for justice. While the Greeks used it often to indicate retributive justice, but the one God of Israel has always portrayed justice as restorative.

So, then, in light of James’s words, we might also then consider that the Hebrew word for “peace” is about restoring wholeness, while the root of the Greek word for peace is tied to “healing.” Christian restorative justice makes things whole and heals. This is the ministry of reconciliation at the heart of the gospel message.

As we have seen in the last two weeks and again today, James is a challenging letter. Perhaps the most difficult challenge is controlling what we say. Perhaps this is why James puts this idea right in the center of his letter, foreshadowing it in Chapter 1, when he tells us to listen more than we speak.

Therefore, as we go forward, perhaps we should take a moment to ponder some questions and use them to answer how we might live out the gospel message in James.

First, how might listening more and talking less help us better discern the will of God?

Often, media and especially social media have more time to shape our thoughts and opinions than we give to prayer, bible study, and personal conversation. So then, how might we restore dialogue and good words, or blessings, to our everyday lives?

Justice calls out injustice in order to set it right, but it does not require shame as retribution, but restoration and reconciliation. Consider this: How does labeling a person or cursing them prevent justice, since these bring shame, rather than reconciliation?

Lastly, consider how reigning in our words might do more to plant seeds of justice? To put it another way, how might peacemaking, as mediators of wholeness and healing, bring justice better than seeking retribution?