

S E S S I O N F I V E

**A CHALLENGE TO SELF-EXALTING
CHRISTIANS WHO WERE DESTROYING
THE HARMONY OF THE CHURCH***James 3:1—4:12***I. INTRODUCTION**

When we come to Jas 3:1, we clearly come to a new major section of the epistle. In chapter two, James expressed his concern for believers to *exercise their faith* by the doing of good deeds of mercy, especially for the less fortunate (a concern that flowed out of Jas 1:19-27). Beginning with 3:1, however, James attacks the sin of abusing the tongue.

Two questions arise at this point: (1) is James's discussion about the misuse of the tongue a *general* matter or is this related to a more specific problem within the community of believers that he was aware of?; and (2) how does the paragraph on the tongue in 3:1-12 relate to the following paragraphs? That is, does Jas 3:1-12 belong to a larger unit within the book, and if so, what is the connection and flow of thought?

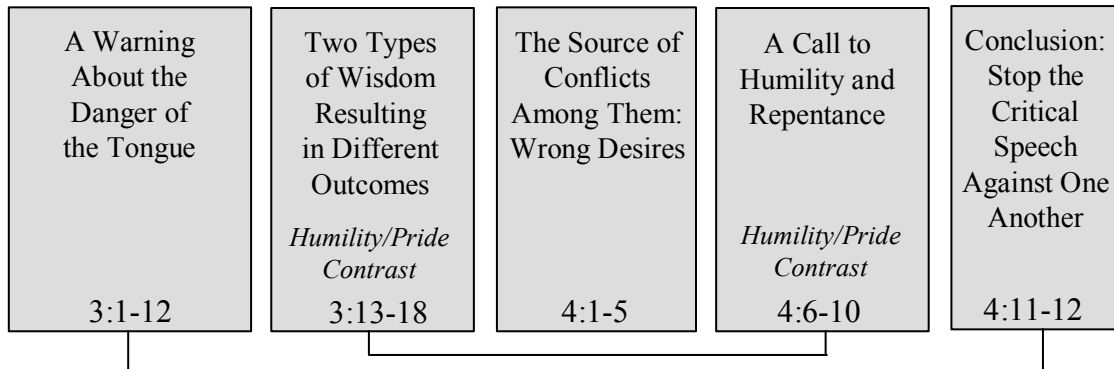
I will seek to establish that the teaching on the tongue in 3:1-12 was not just general teaching on proper speech. Rather, James was seeking to address a very specific problem that was taking place among these believers, and that this issue is very related to the following paragraphs dealing with wisdom, conflicts and repentance. I will also seek to establish that 3:1—4:12 is a unified section with a common theme and concern. The concern was for sin in the church that was threatening to disrupt the harmony of their union.

II. EVIDENCE FOR THE UNITY OF 3:1—4:12

- A. Notice that this section begins and ends with the topic of the misuse of the tongue: 3:1-12 and 4:11-12. In each section, mention is made of speech that is being used *against* others (i.e., critical and slanderous speech). In 3:9, we note the matter of "cursing man," while in 4:11 we have the similar issue of "speaking against a brother."
- B. Notice the topic of pride that runs throughout these paragraphs:
 - 1. 3:5 - "boasts of great things"
 - 2. 3:14 - "do not be arrogant" (also the mention of "selfish ambition")
 - 3. 4:6 - "God is opposed to the proud" (note the calls to humility in 4:6 and 4:10)
 - 4. 4:11 - the guilt of being a judge of the law reflects pride (felt they were above it)
- C. Notice that the idea of "judgment" mentioned in 3:1 is picked up again at the end with the reminder of the Lord as Judge in 4:12.

III. IDENTIFICATION OF THE SUBUNITS

The Subunits of 3:1—4:12



IV. OVERALL OBSERVATIONS

A. We should first observe that the paragraphs are very much related:

1. The abuse of the tongue in 3:1-12 (boasting/cursing men) was motivated by an earthly wisdom characterized by envy and selfish ambition (3:13-18). That is, the second paragraph explains the *mentality* behind the abuse of the tongue.
2. There are several links between 3:13-18 and 4:1-5, and the chapter break at 4:1 should not be viewed as a major break.

(1) The mention of "jealousy/envy" (ζήλος) in 3:16 is picked up again by "envious" (ζηλοῦτε) in 4:2. (2) The emphasis upon "making peace" in 4:18 is contrasted with the idea of quarrels and conflicts in 4:1 (notice also the thought of "disorder" in 3:16). (3) The thought of "earthly wisdom" in 3:15 carries over with the rebuke for being a "friend of the world" in 4:4. (4) The selfish motives of the heart mentioned in 3:14 are viewed again as "wrong motives" in 4:3.

3. 4:1-5 with 4:6-10

(1) The thought of asking and not receiving from the Lord in 4:3 is contrasted with the idea of the Lord giving "a greater grace" in 4:6. (2) The inner lusting and wrong motives mentioned in 4:1-3 find their remedy in 4:8 with the call to "purify your hearts."

4. 4:11-12 with previous paragraphs

As already mentioned, 4:11-12 reiterates the matter of abusive speech from 3:1-12 as well as the judgment warning. The mention of the "proud" in 4:6 is met again in

the idea of those who were arrogantly making themselves a judge of the law in 4:11.

B. The lead statement: "let not many of you become teachers"

Our initial reaction to this may be to think that James is merely cautioning Christians about becoming teachers. Yet, the details of these paragraphs suggest that more is involved. Apparently, the concern was aimed at specific individuals who were seeking to exalt themselves as teachers in the community, but who were in actuality motivated by selfish ambition. They were seeking prominence out of a spirit of jealousy and proud ambition. In so doing, they were causing great conflicts in the church.

1. In the first paragraph, James mentions sinful ways about their speech. They boasted of great things (3:5), and they "cursed men" (3:9). So they were self-exalting while at the same time speaking evil of others.
2. In the 2nd paragraph, we observe that they were not motivated by the "gentleness of wisdom" (i.e., humility) but by bitter envy and selfish ambition.
3. Their envy of others (4:2) prompted them to fight and quarrel to get what they wanted (i.e., places of spiritual prominence).
4. Notice that 4:10 ends with the promise that if they humble themselves before the Lord, He would actually *exalt them*. They don't have to exalt themselves to be recognized by others as a "teacher" (spiritual authority). They must let the Lord exalt them to such a role.

CONCLUSION

All the material in 3:1 through 4:12 should be viewed as a unit with a common theme. There were some in the community of believers who were seeking to promote themselves as "teachers" out of pride and false motives. This had led to them resorting to abusive speech—criticizing and slandering others to make themselves look better and get what they wanted. Hence, there were quarrels and conflicts. Nevertheless, God would not honor these "would-be" teachers, because of the pride and worldly wisdom that motivated them. James called them to a thorough repentance.

V. A WARNING ABOUT THE DANGER OF THE TONGUE (3:1-12)

A. A Warning to Those Who Coveted Being "Teacher" (3:1-2)

1. Relation of "teachers" to the context: those who teach regularly use the tongue, an activity which is hard to keep from sinning.

2. Clarification: although all Christians can sin with their tongue, this section is aimed primarily at some who improperly wanted to be teachers. These "would-be" teachers were "boasting" and "cursing" others, thus harming the body of Christ. They considered themselves as "spiritual" but they were not (1:26).
3. "a stricter judgment" - no doubt James is thinking of the judgment seat of Christ which he had mentioned in Jas 2:12-13. James reminds them of the responsibility that comes with the privilege (Lk 12:48; 2 Tim 1:14).
4. A tongue under control is the mark of a "perfect" man – recall the use of this word back in 1:4. Looks at tremendous spiritual maturity as a result of cooperation with God in the process of sanctification and submission to divine training (trials!).

Note: the following three points alert us why true spiritual teachers need to be mature Christians who are submitted unto the Lord:

- B. The Incredible Power of the Tongue (3:3-6)
- C. The Difficulty of Controlling the Tongue (3:7-8)
- D. The Evil and Inconsistency of the Tongue When Not Under God's Control (3:9-12)

VI. TWO TYPES OF WISDOM WITH CONTRASTING OUTCOMES (3:13-18)

This paragraph is very related to the above. In light of the power and difficulty in using the tongue, only mature believers ought to be in positions of spiritual teaching. Hence, James asks, "Who among you is wise and understanding?" There are those who exalt themselves as spiritual authorities but who are in reality motivated by a *false wisdom*. James carefully distinguishes the true wisdom from the false. One leads to disorder while the other makes for peace in the body.

A. Good Behavior Results From the Right Wisdom in Humility (3:13)

A teacher should naturally have "wisdom." James wants to point out, however, that there are two kinds of wisdom. By the "gentleness of wisdom," he probably is thinking of *humility*, as he will subsequently describe that as the true goal in 4:6.

B. False Wisdom From Below Leads to Disorder and Evil (3:14-16)

The mention of "arrogant" in 3:14 alerts us that pride is the ultimate culprit behind those operating out of envy and selfish ambition. James is suggesting that those who were aspiring to be teachers were envious of others and had selfish ambitions. They would only bring disorder to the church (which he elaborates in 4:1-3).

C. True Wisdom From Above Leads to Peace-making (3:17-18)

Notice the *Christian character* that accompanies God's wisdom—reminds us of Jas 1:4. It is first "pure," a word which speaks of *moral blamelessness*. Those who have been trained in God's righteousness become those who bring peace within the body of Christ.

VII. THE SOURCE OF CONFLICTS AMONG THEM: WRONG DESIRES (4:1-5)

Because some sought to promote themselves as *spiritual authorities* in the church by means of the wisdom from below, quarrels and conflicts broke out in the church. James now confronts the sin head-on.

A. The Identification of the Fighting Within the Body of Christ (4:1-3)

1. James identifies the source of the problem as their "pleasures" (Gk ἡδονή). This is a word meaning "desires." The word "lust" in vs 2 is similar, and the Gk word ἐπιθυμέω can mean to "lust after" or "desire." The word does not have to mean lust for materialistic things or sexual lust. It probably means their desire to attain to spiritual prominence. Support:
 - a. The general context about wanting to be teachers and selfish ambition
 - b. The clue from 4:2b – you are envious (ζηλοῦτε)—take note that the noun form (ζήλος) of this verb occurred in 3:16.
 - c. The call to repent in the next section focuses on *pride*.
2. The asking/not receiving does not pertain to things but to spiritual authority
The right approach was to ask God with the right motivation and humility. God was not granting this to them, because they had wrong motives.

B. The Rebuke of Those Who Were Being Hostile Toward God (4:4-5)

1. By referring to them as "adulteresses" in 4:4, he is not suggesting they were non-Christians. This is an OT motif for those who were being unfaithful to God.
2. The "friendship with the world" recalls the wisdom that is earthly in 3:15—they were choosing to follow the spirit of this world rather than the way of the Lord.
3. Verse 5 is extremely problematic for two reasons: (1) this is the most difficult verse in the epistle to translate; and (2) we cannot identify what "Scripture" is referred to.
 - a. There are several possible translations
 - b. Comments about the translation:
We cannot tell from the Greek what is the intended subject of the verb, or whether the "spirit" (πνεῦμα) refers to the Holy Spirit or the human spirit. This could mean "the (human) spirit envies" or "the (Holy) Spirit jealously

desires" or "He (God) desires the Spirit" (i.e., that we live to please the Spirit rather than being friends with the world). Either of the latter two would suggest that God is jealous for our allegiance (contrast *adulteresses*).

c. Which "Scripture"?

The end of vs 5 is not a quotation from the OT. Two possible solutions: (1) he is thinking about the upcoming quotation in vs 6; or (2) he does not have in mind a specific Scriptural reference but means a *Scriptural theme*. The latter would make good sense if we translate the verse as God's jealous desire, for there are numerous verses in the OT referring to God as a *jealous God* (Ex 20:5; 34:14; Zech 8:2). He even says His name is "Jealous." Whenever the allegiance of His people is diverted, He is legitimately jealous.

VIII. A CALL TO HUMILITY AND REPENTANCE (4:6-10)

A. The Biblical Principle Pertaining to Spiritual Exaltation (4:6)

Fundamentally, those who improperly aspired to be "teachers" were motivated by pride. The author quotes Prov 3:34 (from the LXX) to instruct them about the principles God operates by. God is ready to give to the one who is humble, but He will personally thwart the proud. This answers why they ask but do not receive in 4:3.

B. The Call to Repentance (4:7-10)

1. Take note of the parallels with 1 Pet 5:1-10. In that context, younger men were instructed to be humble and wait for God to exalt them at the proper time. In that context, it was to positions of spiritual authority (elders!).
2. "Resist the devil" --that is, his temptations to pride (recall demonic wisdom in 3:15)
3. Verse 8 – they needed restored closeness to God by renouncing sin and getting rid of the evil motives working within them.
4. "Be miserable" – this is not the norm for the Christian life, but a depiction of the repentance needed by those consumed with pride.
5. Verse 10 - if they would truly humble themselves, there is the hope that God would eventually exalt them as spiritual authorities in the church (compare 1 Pet 5:6—at the proper time).

IX. CONCLUSION: CRITICAL AND CONDEMNING SPEECH MUST CEASE (4:11-12)

Following the call to repentance in 4:6-10, the author restates the main concern he has had. They must stop the abusive speech. The use of the term "brethren" underscores that the preceding section is not a call to salvation for non-Christians. The primary command in vs 11 ("do not speak against") is the verb καταλαλεῖτε, present imperative of καταλαλέω. The present imperative with the negative (μη) means to stop doing something that one is presently doing. So, verse 11 is not merely a prohibition; it is a call to cease the sin that was actually taking place. To "judge the law" means to excuse yourself from obeying the Word (recall Lev 19:16-18).