

Letter of St. James . . . Catholic Scripture Study

But no human being can tame the tongue -- a restless evil, full of deadly poison (James 3:8).

Week #3 – Taming the Tongue (3:1-12)

I. INTRODUCTION

We have all heard it said, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” However, experience shows that the opposite is realized at every stage of life.

The truth is that words can hurt, even kill if not used responsibly. Sirach 28:17 says, ***“The blow of a whip raises a welt, but a blow of the tongue crushes the bones.”***

James illustrates the power of the tongue by drawing on two analogies: a horse’s bit and a ship’s rudder.

In both images we learn that the direction of a horse and ship are determined by steering a small bit and a rudder.

James teaches us an important principle, if you control what you say; you can control the rest of what you do, hence the direction of your entire life.

James warns us that the tongue is a fire capable of far reaching destruction. Unlike an ax or chainsaw, the tongue can land one blow with destructive repercussions far beyond the initial act.

The whole course of one’s life can be affected by one statement. Teachers should take special care as they will be judged with greater strictness.

As a result, James admonishes us to be disciplined and consistent in the area of our speech. We must not allow both blessings and curses to flow from our mouth.

Read: James 3:1-12

II. WORDS HAVE CONSEQUENCES (JAMES 3:1-2)

[1] Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, for you know that we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness.

[2] For we all make many mistakes, and if any one makes no mistakes in what he says he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body also.

A. Teachers

Words are not neutral. They have consequences, for good or evil.

Parents and Christian educators bear great responsibility for their teaching and influence. A teacher is in a unique position to influence his or her students for wrong or for right.

This power cannot be taken lightly! And those who teach will be judged all the more strictly.

This is especially true in the Church and in our Catholic schools. Pastors and teachers are expected to live and teach Catholic truth in all its aspects.

Please note that by saying ***“let not many of you become teachers,”*** James is not trying to discourage people from teaching but rather saying that the ramifications of making a mistake must be taken seriously.

B. Dangers Teachers Must Avoid

- Teaching opinions instead of truth;
- Not practicing what you teach (1 Cor 9:27)

C. Making Mistakes

“For we all make many mistakes . . .” Since a teacher’s mission involves extensive speaking, they are at greater risk than most from making mistakes in what they say.

The prospect of a stricter judgment should restrain them from uttering careless words, and teaching what they themselves do not understand.

That **“we all make mistakes”** should not make us feel as though being good is a futile quest, it should rather encourage us to get up and try again.

- If one succeeds in restraining one’s tongue one has self-control.
- The one who can exercise self-control over his tongue will be able to control his actions as well.

III. THE POWER OF THE TONGUE (JAMES 3:3-6)

The tongue is a microcosm of the fallen world, where sin and hurt prevail. It is extraordinarily difficult to bring under control.

[3] If we put bits into the mouths of horses that they may obey us, we guide their whole bodies.

[4] Look at the ships also; though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.

[5] So the tongue is a little member and boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!

[6] And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is an unrighteous world among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the cycle of nature, and set on fire by hell.

A. Examples

James uses three simple, easy-to-understand examples to show how something small – a horse's bit, a boat's rudder, a small fire – can have a huge effect; the tongue has a similar influence in social life, from youth to old age (the cycle of nature).

- A horse has tremendous power, yet it can be guided almost without effort through the use of bit in its mouth.
- Similarly a large ship, even when driven by strong winds, can be guided by a small rudder.
- A discarded match or cigarette can start a forest fire, just as a carelessly uttered word can be devastatingly destructive with consequences very difficult to control.

James implies that the tongue acts in the same way: it is a small instrument that wields tremendous power – not just for good but also for evil.

B. Good Uses of the Tongue

On the other hand, we can use the tongue to rejoice, to pray, and to give thanks.

- Wise words can bring healing and valuable correction.
- We can feed people spiritually with words, teaching truth and wisdom and kindness.

- We can confess our belief in Christ to the benefit of others and the Glory of God.

God gave us our tongues to use for good, to share in His work.

C. Hell

“The tongue . . . set on fire by hell.”

The word that James uses for “hell” is Gehenna. Gehenna is the Greek form for the Hebrew word Hinnom.

The Hinnom Valley was just south of Jerusalem where they first sacrificed children to Molech; and later used the valley for the burning of garbage and trash.

The New Testament writers came to use the Hinnom Valley as the place where the devil resided. It was considered to be cursed because of the sacrifice of children to the pagan god Molech.

- How can we avoid our churches becoming a garbage pit of gossip where lives are sacrificed?

IV. THIS OUGHT NOT TO BE SO (JAMES 3:7-12)

How successful are people at taming their tongues, according to vs. 7-10?

[7] For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by humankind,

[8] but no human being can tame the tongue -- a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

[9] With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God.

[10] From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brethren, this ought not to be so.

[11] Does a spring pour forth from the same opening fresh water and brackish?

[12] Can a fig tree, my brethren, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

A. The Need to Control the Tongue

James points out that however skilled we are at taming animals, it is impossible for a person on their own to tame the evil, poisonous tongue.

We use it at one moment to bless the Lord, and the next to curse someone made in His likeness.

James says **“this ought not to be so,”** for it is not so in nature:

- A single spring of water yields fresh water or brackish (salty) – but not both.
- In the same way, a fruit tree can bear only one kind of fruit, and
- You will never find fresh water coming from a salt sea.

How is it, then, that good and evil both can proceed from the same mouth, especially if the source of those words is a Christian heart?

B. Hardened Heart: Harmful Words

It is as easy to put the tongue to a good purpose as to an evil one.

Misuse of the tongue is a sign that one's heart is not in the right place: as our Lord already warned us, **“out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks”** (Mt 12:34).

C. Self control

Guarding the mouth is not possible on human strength alone.

How does God help us?

God is within us, through the Holy Spirit, working and helping us and giving us the grace we need.

D. Self-control - Fruit of the Spirit

St. Paul tells the Galatians (Gal 5:22-24) that self-control (which is necessary to tame the tongue) comes not from our own effort but as a fruit of the Holy Spirit. He reassures us (1 Thess 5:23-24), that ***“he who calls you is faithful and he will do it.”***

True and False Wisdom (James 3:13-18)

I. OVERVIEW

In the course of everyday living we are faced with many decisions that can have long-lasting repercussions; decisions such as

- who to marry,
- where to send the children to school,
- how to spend money, and
- what to watch on TV.

With the introduction of the Internet, modern man has found it quite easy to accumulate massive amounts of knowledge on a multitude of subjects.

However, the mistake that is often made is in thinking that knowledge is the same as wisdom. A person may have tremendous knowledge about marriage, but show little wisdom in how they treat their mate.

- Wisdom is the ability to apply knowledge in accordance with God's will and purposes.

This does not happen by accident but is the result of the heart's sincere search for truth and the mind of God as it pertains to everyday living.

We see in this study that like faith, wisdom is demonstrated by actions (works).

II. TWO KINDS OF WISDOM

It is a constant temptation to believe we are wise in ourselves. What happens when we do that?

In the second half of James 3, we see the qualities and effects of Christian (godly) wisdom contrasted with those of worldly (unspiritual) wisdom.

The Christian community, James implies, is characterized by the first type of wisdom which is essentially a life lived by God's values rather than those of the world.

E. An Important Distinction

This is an important distinction for us to make, as the choice has been with us from the beginning and is at the root of our state of separation from God.

Adam and Eve listened to the Serpent's silver tongue and ate fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They desired to be wise, **but on their own terms** rather than by obeying God.

The fruits of the knowledge gained by that disobedience were immediate: Fear, Shame, Discord, and Enmity. Keep these in mind as you read about the wisdom that comes from the Devil, as opposed to that which is from heaven.

Read: James 3:13-18

III. TRUE WISDOM

[13] Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good life let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.

What does James say the wise and understanding person should do?

Those who are wise and understanding should demonstrate that wisdom meekly (humbly) in their actions, by a “good life.”

What is meekness?

- Meekness is not weakness.
- It has been called controlled strength.
- It abounds in the “poor in spirit.”
- It is being humble before God - an attitude exemplified by Moses, who the book of Numbers describes as being more humble than all men on the face of the earth.

James pays particular attention to the practical effects of godly wisdom – meekness, mercy and peace.

IV. EARTHLY (FALSE) WISDOM

[14] But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.

[15] This wisdom is not such as comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish.

[16] For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

False wisdom, on the contrary, leads to bitter zeal, rivalry and resentment.

- This wisdom is “***earthly***.” In other words, it does not come from God or heaven.

- It is “**unspiritual**,” because it comes from a person’s own desires and is not aided by the Holy Spirit.
- Finally, it is “**devilish**,” that is, from the devil, who is the Father of lies and who is the source of human envy (see Wisdom 2: 24).

The results of this earthly wisdom are “**disorder and every vile practice**.”

V. CHRISTIAN (TRUE) WISDOM

[17] But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity.

[18] And the harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

In addition to the “meekness” mentioned earlier James says that the **wisdom from above** which is godly wisdom is pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty and without insincerity.

The “peacemakers” (v.18) create around themselves an environment of righteousness (holiness), and they themselves benefit from the peace they sow.

- In the Old Testament peace and righteousness are mentioned as two fruits of godly wisdom.

Isaiah says something similar: “**And the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever** (Isaiah 32:17).

The “**harvest of righteousness**” is the equivalent of righteousness itself. It is found in keeping the law of the Gospel and doing good works, which show true wisdom.

Righteousness and peace are the direct opposites of vile practices and disorder (v.16), which threaten peace and can lead to war.

Every Christian who strives to live in accordance with his vocation is a sower of holiness and justice-with-peace.

VI. APPLICATION

In James 1:5 we are told that if we lack wisdom we should ask God. Have you asked for wisdom since that first study? What did you ask for and have you received an answer?

VII. REFLECTION

James 3:17 tells us that godly wisdom is “peaceable, gentle, full of mercy” but in the same breath he declares it is “without uncertainty.”

Most people today have a deep fear of a religious faith that is “without uncertainty.” The typical modern view is that a religious faith without uncertainty is just itching to launch a holy war.

Yet, Jesus and the apostles had such faith while exhibiting none of these fearful tendencies. How might it be that someone could have a confident faith that is also “peaceable, gentle, and full of mercy”?

Can you think of someone you know who has or had such faith?

VIII. SUMMARY

- If we are going to walk in the wisdom of God, we must be prepared to walk in a way that may be contrary to what is in vogue.
- We see in Scripture that God often asks those in his kingdom to do things that seem to be at odds with the wisdom of this age. For example, Jesus taught that “he who is greatest among you shall be your servant” (Matthew 23:10).
- As shocking as the cross of Christ may seem, Paul tells us that Christ crucified is the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:23-24).
- Finally, remember that wisdom, like faith is not something that we merely possess in our head. If we are wise we will demonstrate it in our conduct.

As an exercise, write down the major areas of your life where you need wisdom (marriage, children, work, money, etc.). Write down the questions you have pertaining to each area and begin to ask God for wisdom. Be attentive to His wisdom in Scripture, prayer and when attending Mass.

Preparation for Week #4 – The Source of Discord (James 4:1-10)

- Review “Study Questions” in the ICSB for James, Chapters 3 and 4 (see page 24).
- Read carefully and prayerfully James Chapter 4 in the IGNATIUS Catholic Study Bible (ICSB).