

# BIBLE SERIES: "EXPLORING OUR AWESOME BIBLE"

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## JAMES 3-4 – THE TONGUE; GODLY WISDOM; AVOIDING SPIRITUAL ADULTERY

As a review of this Epistle, James has been teaching us the **practical applications of the Christian life** based on Jesus' instructions. It is logical, being a half-brother of Jesus, that James saw "in living color" Jesus' example and wanted to share those lessons with the brethren. In fact, there are 23 references to the Sermon on the Mount! As Alexander Ross mentions: "This Epistle contains more verbal reminiscences [memories] of the teachings of Jesus than **all the other apostolic writings taken together**. Especially noteworthy are its echoes of the Sermon on the Mount...proving the writer had been in close contact with Jesus" (NICNT, pp. 16-17).

We now return to James' illustrations about the tongue. His **third example** is of a **spark** that can cause **a large forest fire**. He says, "Our tongues are small too, and yet they brag about big things. It takes only a spark to start a forest fire! The tongue is like a spark. It is an evil power that dirties the rest of the body and sets a person's entire life on fire with flames that come from hell itself" (James 3:5-6, CEV). Just as match can light a huge blaze, so too, by saying just **a few hurtful words**, one can eventually destroy a marriage, a friendship or a job. As Proverbs says: "There is one who speaks **like the piercings of a sword**...An ungodly man digs up evil, and **it is on his lips like a burning fire**" (Pr. 12:18; 16:27). He says speaking evil words can even bring us to the judgment of **hell fire** (Gr. gehenna), speaking of the lake of fire.

The **fourth picture** is that of an **animal tamer**. Although he can tame wild animals, he still can't tame his own tongue. James says, "For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But **no man can tame the tongue**" (James 3:7-8).

Then he goes to the **fifth simile** about the tongue--of being **like a poisonous snake**. He says: "It is an unruly evil, **full of deadly poison**" (James 3:8).

Next in the **sixth comparison**, he contrasts the tongue with **a fountain of water**. While a spring can have either pure or dirty water come out, the tongue can do **both things at the same time**! He mentions, "With it we bless our God and Father,

and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. **Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening?**" (James 3:9-11).

Lastly, is the **seventh analogy**. He asks, "Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a great vine bear figs?" (Jam. 3:12). This is similar to Christ's teaching of a tree known **by its fruits**" (Mt. 7:20).

Barclay comments about the tongue blessing and cursing at the same time: "This was especially relevant to the Jew. Whenever the name of God was mentioned, a Jew must respond: 'Blessed be he!' Three times a day the devout Jew had to repeat the Shemoneh Esreh, the famous eighteen prayers called Eulogies, every one of which begins. 'Blessed be thou, O God.' God was indeed the *eulogetos*, 'The Blessed One, the One who was continually blessed.' And yet the very mouths and tongues which had frequently and piously blessed God, were the very same mouths and tongues which cursed fellowmen...Many people are very kind to others, and even preach love and gentleness, but at home they shout, blaspheme and insult. There are women who converse very piously in church and then go out and murder someone's reputation with a malicious tongue."

James was condemning the hypocrisy of the tongue in some brethren, as Jesus had said about the Pharisees: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Mt. 23:27-28).

So James now contrasts the difference between **hypocrisy** and **true faith**, saying, "Who is **wise and understanding** among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the **meekness** of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where

envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there" (James 3:13-16).

Barclays notes, "James is asking, **who wants to be a truly wise leader?** Then let him live his life with such **gentleness** and **lack of vanity** that he will be seen to be so. If he is guided by selfish ambition, he will go against the truth he professes. The term 'bitter jealousy' means **selfish ambition** coupled with **a cutting tongue**. Regarding the earthly and animal nature, **the ancients divided man into three parts—body, soul and spirit**. The **body (soma)**, is **our physical body** of flesh and blood; the **soul (psuche)**, is **the physical life** we share with the animals, and the **spirit (pneuma)** is **what only man processes**, which differentiates him from the animals, and which makes him a rational, God-like being. **This is confusing because we use the term 'soul' in the sense that that ancients used the word 'spirit.'**" It is so true!

James now it explains **what the fruits of true wisdom** are: "But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy" (James 3:17).

Here are **seven spiritual fruits** described: (1). **True wisdom is first pure**--from the Gk. *hagnos*, meaning moral and spiritual purity that pleases God. It avoids being polluted by the world or by one's tongue. As Christ said in Mt. 5:8, "Blessed are the **pure in heart**, for they shall see God." (2). **Peaceable**--from *eirenikos*, one who establishes right relationships with God and men. Christ said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God" (Mt. 5:9). (3). **Gentle**--from *epiekes*, or to be **balanced** and **considerate**, knowing **when** to be flexible or stalwart. (4). **Willing to yield**--from *eupeithes*, being **meek** and **easy to correct**. Barclay says it is "not being stubborn but willing to listen to reason." Pr. 25:12 speaks of having "an **attentive** ear" (YLT). (5). **Full of mercy and good spirits**--from *eleos*, one who puts himself in the place of those suffering and helps them in **a concrete way**. Barclay adds, "It is mercy for the man who is in trouble, even if the trouble is his own fault. (6). **Without partiality**--from *adiakritos*, without a divided mind, full of true convictions, the opposite of being "double-minded" (James 1:8). (7). **Without hypocrisy**—

from *anupokritos*, one who is not pretending, but is really what is seen--the genuine thing.

James ends this section by explaining that only by having the quality of *eirene*, or the peace that comes by the forming right relationships with God and man, can such spiritual fruit be produced. He says, "Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by **those who make peace**" (James 3:18).

Here are instructions against resorting to violence because of the many injustices and persecutions against Church members in Judea and around the world. He insisted they were **peacemakers** in the midst of a violent world.

So he goes on to say, "**Where** do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your **desires** for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and **do not receive**, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures" (James 4:1-3).

In the Roman Empire there were persecutions against Christians and also a lot of pressure to participate in wars and violence. Alexander Ross comments: "In Judea...the temple had become a brigand's cave (Mt. 21:13). The fanatical sect of the Zealots were at all times ready to stir up the people to insurrection and murder...the dagger of the assassin was often secretly employed to get rid of a political opponent" (NICNT, p. 75).

The Zealots (or the *sicarii* from the Latin *sica*, a short, curved dagger, see Acts 21:38), were an extremist group who were willing to resort to arms rather than pay tribute. In a few years, they would start a disastrous war against Rome. Simon, one of Jesus' disciples, was formerly a Zealot (Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). James warns the brethren that they can never engage in acts of violence. In fact, as Josephus and Eusebius recount, James himself would soon die from persecutions at the hands of the Jewish leaders and the mob, by being thrown off the pinnacle of the temple and then stoned.

James goes on to explain why sometimes prayers are not answered as we wish. He says, "You ask (in the Greek it means, 'You are asking for yourself')." Ross states, "It is possible, however, to ask **wrongly**. 'If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us' (1 Jn. 5:14). But if we merely

seek some material gain which we intend to spend in our carnal pleasures...we need not expect to have our prayers answered" (p. 76).

James is quite blunt when he says, "Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that *friendship* with the world is *enmity* with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a *friend* of the world makes himself an *enemy* of God" (James 4:4-5).

The term "adulterers" refers to the Old Testament analogy of God as Israel's husband and her as His wife (Is. 54:5; Jer. 2:2, 3:20; Hos. 1-3; 9:1). In the New Testament, Christ is the bridegroom and the Church is the bride (2 Cor. 11:1-2; Eph. 5:24-28; Rev. 19:7).

Therefore, Church members should not "adulterate" by mixing in the carnal wrangling of this world nor its wars. In fact, ***in the first three centuries, Christians did not participate in wars.***

As historian Paul Johnson notes: "***This*** was in ***the original Christian tradition***: violence was abhorrent to the early Christians, ***who preferred death to resistance***; and ***Paul***, attempting to interpret Christ, ***did not even try to construct a case for the legitimate use of force***. Again, it was ***St. Augustine*** who gave western Christianity ***the fatal twist in this direction***...In Augustine's view, war might always be waged, provided it was done so ***by the command of God***. This formulation of the problem was ***doubly dangerous***. Not only did it allow the existence of ***the 'just' war***, which became a ***commonplace*** of Christian moral theology; but it ***discredited the pacifist***, whose refusal to fight a war ***defined as 'just' by the ecclesiastical authorities became a defiance of divine commands***. Thus, the modern imprisonment of the conscientious objector is deeply rooted in standard Christian dogma. ***So is the anomaly of two Christian states each fighting a 'just' war against each other***" (History of Christianity, Kindle Edition, pp. 242-243).

As Jesus said: "You cannot serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24). If we love God and put Him first, we will not accept the false values of the world. That is why James says that being a friend of the world (or accepting its false values) constitutes being an enemy of God and of His sacred laws.

To avoid "adulterating" with the world, James says: "Or do you think that the Scripture says in

vain, 'The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously?' But He gives more grace. Therefore, He says: 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.' Therefore, submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up" (James 4:5-10).

Here are six qualities to be a friend of God and to not accept the false values of the world. (1). ***Humility***--which is putting God first. It means not caring about being considered as little by the world. This avoids pride, which is the opposite of humility. (2). ***Submitting to God***--is really trusting God for help and having faith and patience in the outcome. (3). ***Resisting the Devil***--instead of giving in to temptations, resist them successfully. Then the Devil will have nothing to do. (4). ***Approaching God first***--one should initiate the contact, rather than waiting for God to do it first. (5). ***Cleanse oneself from sin***--consistently going to God, repenting, seeking forgiveness and change. (6). ***Afflict oneself***--from the Gk. word *talaiporein*, meaning and not to eat. It refers to ***fasting*** and not taking sin lightly. By humbling ourselves before God, the result is "He will exalt you" spiritually.

If these virtues exist, James says a member will not slander nor feel superior to his brethren. He says: "Brethren, do not murmur against one another. He who murmurs against his brother and judges his brother, murmurs against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law, but a judge. There is only one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you that you should judge another?" (4:11-12). The term "murmur" is *kalalaleo*, and means to slander another when he is not present. This arrogant attitude shows he considers himself the judge of the brother and not a simple partner in the battle of the faith. Paul clarifies: "Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal that counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God" (1 Cor. 4:5). What a great Epistle!