

# James 3.13-18 / Crossroads / 07.08.12

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🔊 2x script; slides; handouts; water; Bible

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Thank you & Prayer **[Slide 1: Temple Mount]**

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## Introduction

- † LeeAnn and I did not argue much when we were dating. She was pretty laid back about most things, and my attitude about disagreements had always been to say, “Honey, if you don’t like it, there’s the door.” I am not advocating that as a Christian attitude, just acknowledging that I had it.
  - Those of you who have been married know that things get more intense after the ceremony. You cannot say, “There’s the door,” anymore; you start to realize what a “permanent” partnership means for your lifestyle; and you are stuck with each other all the time, happily or not.
  - LeeAnn was not well equipped for this aspect of marriage, because her family rarely argued when she was growing up. They are generally easy going and loving, and the children did what their parents asked or got their hides tanned.
  - I grew up with lawyers and politicians on one side of the family and Italians on the other, and we all liked to argue. Then I went to New College, where I was encouraged to argue in class. I have been described as a strongly argumentative person.
  - So sometime after our wedding, we were arguing about something, and I was right up in her face, talking aggressively, feeling pretty comfortable in this activity. LeeAnn might not have been a skilled debater, but the equipping she did have was a blue belt in the martial art of Aikijutsu. So when I got in her face, she poked me in the throat, which somewhat cooled my enthusiasm.
  - I am embarrassed to admit that we had to repeat this process three or four times before I learned my lesson. I think God used this skill of LeeAnn’s to make me think about how I was talking to her. When I was being harsh, I was not acting on anything I had learned in the Bible; you see that, right? I was giving free reign to a fleshly impulse and reacting as I had learned in my culture, particularly my family culture. God wanted me to realize this was wrong: I needed to learn from him how to talk to my wife when I was upset.
- † Suppose I ask you: “Who is wise and understanding among you?” I might be asking, “Do you think *you* are a wise person?” How would you answer that? Most of us feel confident in the day to day decisions we make, so most of us would say we are wise people. I would like to think I am wise, but some of my decision making – such as how I was speaking to my wife – makes me wonder.
  - Today we are going to look at James 3.13-18, which begins with this question: “Who is wise and understanding among you?” James is going to show his friends that there are two competing types of life philosophy, with different sources, different content, and different results. He wanted his friends – and he would want you – to choose the right one, the true wisdom from God.

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## Background

- † **[Slide 2: James Ossuary]** The author of the epistle of James was Jesus’ brother.
  - This is a picture of an ossuary from the first century that has the inscription, “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus.” The Israel Antiquities Authority alleged the inscription was a forgery, but an Israeli court recently dismissed the charge. Many scholars have declared it is authentic. It was rare for an inscription to mention a brother, unless he was very well known, so this most likely is the box that held the bones of the James who wrote this letter in the Bible. This has nothing to do with my sermon, but I thought you would like it.

- Can you imagine growing up with Jesus as your older brother? Do you think James got tired of Jesus correcting him and quoting scripture at him all the time? Can you see their mother, Mary, saying to James, “Why can’t you be more like your brother? He is such a good boy...” In John 7, we learn that Jesus’ fully grown brothers did not believe in him and even mocked him.
- † But then Jesus appeared to James after the resurrection, as we learn in 1 Corinthians 15, and James believed. Paul tells us in Galatians 1 that James was no pew sitter: he quickly became one of the leaders in the Jerusalem Church, and Paul even called him an “apostle.”
- In this letter, it becomes obvious that James was listening to Jesus even when he didn’t believe, because he repeats many of the things Jesus taught. James identified himself in this letter as a “δοῦλος” of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ; δοῦλος means slave.
  - When I asked, “Who is wise and understanding among you,” I might have been asking about who are the wise spiritual leaders among you. One way you can identify who your spiritual leaders are in this church is that they act like slaves of Christ!

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### Historical Context

- † **[Slide 3: Temple Mount]** You are looking at the Temple Mount as it looks today in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem Church in James’ day was comprised mostly of Jewish people who believed in Jesus as their savior.
- They faced a great deal of persecution from their fellow Jews who did not believe in Jesus, and who thought the followers of Christ were corrupting the Jewish faith. As we know from the book of Acts, this persecution got so bad that many of the Jewish Christians fled Jerusalem. Even Peter and John left for a time, but James stayed.
- † James wrote this letter to those Jewish Christians who fled the persecution in Jerusalem. He wrote to warn his friends about their exposure to three influences, the world, the flesh, and evil, because if they were not vigilant against these influences then they would be misled into living like unsaved people instead of like people of God.

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### Literary Context

- † **[Slide 4: James Outline]** Please turn in your Bibles to James 3.13. If you are new to the Bible, James is toward the end, just after the book of Hebrews. I like to teach a biblical book straight through from the beginning, but since you probably want to go home before suppertime, let me quickly bring you up to where our passage occurs.
- In chapter 1, James exhorted his readers to *stand confidently*. They were experiencing persecution and poverty, but he encouraged them to endure the trials of life by holding fast to their hope in Christ, and continuing to walk in faith and obedience.
  - In chapter 2, James exhorted his readers to *serve compassionately*. He encouraged them to see that true faith in Jesus would lead to transformation inside which increasingly would lead them to selflessly and lovingly serve others regardless of what those people had to offer in return.
  - In the first part of chapter 3, James exhorted his readers to *speak carefully*. He encouraged them to realize that what they said was terribly important because of the impact it had on others. Specifically, he chided them for using their tongues to both praise God and curse other people who are made in God’s image.
  - His instructions thus far have been to *BE*, *DO*, and *SAY* what God wants. Today we will look at the second part of James 3, which elaborates on speaking carefully. As I said, James will show us there are two kinds of life philosophies, each with distinct sources, content, and results.

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### James 3:13-18

† **[Slide 5: 3.13]** We begin with our question in 3.13 [ESV]: “Who is wise and understanding among you?” Look how James follows this up: “Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.”

- Where the ESV has “meekness” here, some translations have “gentleness.” The most recent research says the Greek word [πραΰτης] means “not being overly impressed by one’s self-importance” [BDAG], so I think of it as humility or meekness.
- In effect James is saying, “If you think you are wise, show it!” And how do we show it? James says we prove it by our lifestyle, by the things we say and do every day and how we go about it, which prove we are humble, as anyone would be who understood God’s wisdom. If we understand from Scripture that we are corrupted with sin and deserve eternal punishment, but are saved only by an act of God’s generosity, then we will be humble and act humbly.
- In the Bible, a fool is one who rejects God’s revelation; the wise person is the one who accepts God’s revelation, believes in it, and acts on it, because God’s revelation is wisdom.
- So James effectively is saying, “If you think you are a wise person, act like someone who lives by God’s revelation!”

† **[Slide 6: 3.14]** v.3.14 [ESV]: “But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.”

- This is the content of the wrong kind of life philosophy: bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. We will define them further in a moment, but notice that they likely will not lead to the humility that the truly wise person will have.
- James says if this is you, be upfront about it and admit that the source of your life philosophy is not the wisdom from God’s revelation, as he elaborates in the next verse...

† **[Slide 7: 3.15]** v.3.15 [ESV]: “This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.”

- It is a consistent biblical teaching that the inspiration to sin comes from our culture, our flesh, and our spiritual adversaries. I think James is saying the same here: the sources for this sinful life philosophy are our culture, our flesh, and demons. Let’s see the results of this life philosophy...

† **[Slide 8: 3.16]** v.3.16 [ESV]: “For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.”

- Where the ESV has “vile” here, some translations have “evil.” Same letters, just rearranged; evil is a good translation, just strongly worded. The Greek word [φᾰύλος] means “morally substandard” [BDAG].
- So, we have a life philosophy that comes from our culture, our flesh, and our spiritual adversaries, is comprised of thoughts of bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, and leads to disorder and every vile practice. Not so good. Next, James tells us about the true wisdom that comes from Heaven.

† **[Slide 9: 3.17]** v.3:17 [ESV]: “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.”

- Your translation might differ on a couple of these words, but that is ok, we get the point: This sounds more like Christ, right? And these traits sound more likely to lead to the humility we already know is a result of wisdom. Let’s see the other results of God’s wisdom:

- † **[Slide 10: 3.18]** v.3:18 [ESV]: “And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”

### Elaboration

- † **[Slide 11: whole chart]** Note the contrast between the two sets of results: God’s wisdom brings righteousness instead of vile practices, and peace instead of disorder. The Greek word for disorder here [ἀκαταστασία] is like the unruliness of a mob.
- Now recall, James is talking in this chapter about our speech, our tongues. So he is saying that these results are what can come from what we say!
- † You might ask, “How can what we say bring disorder or vile practices?” Well, let us think about this. In v.3.9, James condemned the practice of cursing people made in God’s image.
- Cursing people with our tongues is not just the cinematic putting of a hex on people. The Greek word [καταράσσειν] means something like expressing loathing for someone. It is cussing at them, harshly criticizing them, calling them names, gossiping about them, lying to them, using sarcasm, mean words, or harshness when talking with them.
- † If our speech is characterized by cussing, criticism, name calling, gossip, lies, sarcasm, mean words, and harshness, what’s going to happen?
- we will lessen our credibility as a witness for Christ because we are not acting like Christ;
  - we will harm relationships even within the church;
  - we will create opposition to whatever good we hope to do even within the church;
  - we will distort our teaching;
  - we will hurt people’s feelings;
  - we will hurt people beyond their feelings, even damaging their walk with God in life;
  - we will create political factions within the church body,
  - and I am sure you can think of many other ways that what we say will cause disorder and vile practices. Revolutions have started with words, and they were not always good.
- † James argues these problems with our tongues are caused by having the wrong kind of thoughts in our brains: bitter jealousy and selfish ambition.
- Bitter jealousy is feeling resentment about the success of someone else and feeling discontent with what you have.
  - Selfish ambition in the early church often meant seeking to be divisive in the church to elevate your own position of influence. Maybe among James’ people, some were forming their own little political parties within their new churches, as we know happened later in other churches.
  - Both of these emotions elevate our selfish desires to higher importance than our integrity. Having these thoughts in our brains is a character problem, one which reflects a lack of contentment, a lack of humility, and a misguided need for relative success that goes counter to God’s Word.
  - James is saying that it is our hostility inside that leads to a hostile tongue.
- † Sometimes, when I am having discussions about spirituality, a person will get defensive and say, “You have no idea what my relationship with God is like!” Actually, I often do. You see, just as we

have physical symptoms that characterize a physical problem, we have spiritual symptoms that characterize a spiritual problem.

- After I hurt my neck, I bumped into my neurologist at a youth ministry event. He asked me some questions and did some tests on my arms and then said, “Your problem is with this disk. Come into my office tomorrow and I will prove it to you.” In his office, he had a book that specified what would happen for each disk if it went bad. Each disk presses on a specific nerve, which causes specific kinds of pain and specific kinds of weakness. So my doctor knew what was wrong with me just by a casual examination.
- It can be similar spiritually. The Bible gives us a lot of evidence to look for in discerning a person’s spiritual health. Using that evidence, often we quickly can tell if a person is intimate with God and walking with God, or not.

† **[Slide 12: two kinds of speech]** I have distributed a self assessment; if you didn’t get one on the way in, please be sure to get one on the way out; it is not the sort of thing you can share with your spouse, so make sure you get your own. I hope you will prayerfully do this self assessment later today. The first question we want to ask ourselves is what is the evidence from our lives? Specifically, what is the evidence from our tongues?

- Are you known for promoting peace and righteousness with your speech, for being pure, merciful, impartial, and sincere?
- Or is your speech characterized by cussing, criticism, name calling, gossip, lying, sarcasm, meanness, and harshness?

† I hope you will believe that most of the time I humbly promote peace and righteousness.

- But I confess before you that I am not perfect in my speech. I am especially guilty of getting impatient with people. I get impatient with other drivers when I am in the car, and sometimes I call them a bad name, like “moron” or “idiot.” I have my name calling down to the PG-13 level, but it is still wrong. God made that person in his own image, and commanded me to love, so I have no right to call anyone something derogatory.
- I never call my wife a bad name, because I fear her and her blue belt, but I do get impatient with my wife when we have a communication breakdown, and I know that the way I talk to her in those moments causes her pain, which is a vile practice on my part. I have hurt her with my speech – with my choice of words and tone of voice – and we see from our lesson today that in those moments I must not be acting on the wisdom of God.

† Galatians 5.22-23 lists the fruit of the Spirit – traits you will exhibit if you are walking with God – and these are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

- If the way I talk reveals a heart that is low on most of the fruit of the Spirit then I have a problem. These fruit are a gift of the Spirit, so if we are not feeling them, if we are not manifesting them in the way we talk, then we are not in a healthy relationship with God.

† **[Slide 13: two kinds of character]** If I look deeper inside, I get to our second question for self-assessment: what is in our hearts and minds?

- When I get impatient with people, it usually is because I am stressed about getting everything done. Perhaps I set out with good motivations, but I have over-booked myself, which clearly is not living God’s way, a way that calls for adequate time for his interruptions, for reflection and prayer, for rest and fun.

- I am in what my wife calls “task mode” – I am getting things done! – and I do not have time for people or even God; and I do not sense those fruit of the Spirit in me, which is why I don’t exhibit them in my speech. I am selfishly ambitious in these moments: I am concerned with achieving what I have set out to do, instead of being content and concerned with what God has brought me.
  - I have more issues with selfish ambition than I do with jealousy, but it is different for every person. Perhaps when you look at the handout, you will find that there are areas of your life that are marked by jealousy or ambitions that are out of balance. If so, don’t be alarmed, just start praying for God’s help.
  - If you don’t see jealousy or selfish ambition in any area of your life, maybe you are deceiving yourself! Go back to the evidence of your tongue: if you are not totally glorifying God and edifying people in your speech, then James says you have a problem somewhere in your thinking.
- † **[Slide 14: two sources]** The third question we want to ask is about the source of our life philosophy.
- If I asked you whether you thought you were getting your life philosophy from God or from the world, what would you say? Probably, since you go to church, you would answer, “From God, of course!” Ah! but what is the evidence from your tongue?
  - And what if I then asked you to compare the amount of time you spend in prayer and the Bible each day with the amount of time you spend watching television or surfing the Internet? Time spent on an activity is not the only factor, but exposure is important: James wrote this letter to warn his friends about exposure to a culture that reflected the values of the flesh and evil. That should sound familiar to us.
- † We tend to look to celebrities, television, and advertising when we decide how to dress, how to act in certain situations, how to talk.
- Growing up, I was torn between the playful Axel Foley character in *Beverly Hills Cop* and the intense Captain Furillo of *Hill Street Blues*. There was a part of me that was Hans Solo of *Star Wars* or Hawkeye Pierce of *MASH* and a part of me that was Billy Joel or Roger Waters of Pink Floyd. The problem was, none of those people were followers of Christ; so as I was striving to become like someone, it had nothing to do with striving to become like Christ.
  - Without realizing it, I was getting my life philosophy from our culture, and from my flesh, and from demons, since I was deceived. I have James reminding me that today when I call someone a bad name or when I respond in impatient anger, I am drawing on what I have learned from my culture, or the impulses of my sinful flesh, or even the promptings of our evil adversaries.
- † In 2 Corinthians 10.5, Paul said he was “taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” [NASB]. We too should take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. We need to consider “where did this thought come from?” and “is it from God?” When it is not, we need to reject it.
- † God is the source of true wisdom, and he has given us the Bible. This is not just a book. It is God’s revelation, his wisdom. In this book is everything we need to know about God, about salvation, and about the Spirit-led Christian life.
- In contrast, there are three sources of false wisdom: our flesh, with its greedy desires; our culture, with its insistence on self-gratification, selfish motivation, and sinful objectives; and our adversary, who would love to lead us astray and so make us useless to God.
  - We need to choose which source we want, then we need to take steps to change our way of life so that we truly are getting our wisdom from that source and not from the others.



- Do you think Jesus was influenced by anything in such a way that it made him less influenced by God the Father's wisdom? No! Of course not, Jesus was sinless, and he was God the Son himself. So if our goal is to follow Christ, to be transformed to be like him through the renewing of our minds, then should we not be careful of what goes into and remains in our minds?
- Paul said in Romans 12.2 [NASB]: "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind..." We must take care to limit the world's influence on us, so we are not conformed to it, and we must take steps that cooperate with the Holy Spirit's work in us to transform us to be like Christ, through the renewing of our minds.

## Application

- † **[Slide 15: Steps]** As you will see on the handout, I have provided some suggestions for steps we can take to ensure we get our wisdom from God. Primarily they fall under three categories: spend more time learning from God, spend less time taking in what the world has to offer, and spend some time evaluating the current state of your mind and heart.
- This is consistent with what Pastor Bob said last week, about challenging ourselves to improve, assessing our current state, and allowing God's wisdom to change our perceptions and attitudes.
  - I urge you to make this your resolution: that you will do something to begin getting more wisdom from God. If you are not a regular attendee at church, not in a small group, not doing daily Bible study and prayer, then you can start with those things. If you already do all that, there are some other suggestions on the handout.
  - I also urge you to take steps to counter the influence of the world on your thinking. For several years, LeeAnn and I had our cable turned off. We had the conviction that what we were watching was not honoring God, was not edifying us or building up our faith, and was not healthy in that it was putting thoughts counter to the biblical teachings in our heads. This might not be a problem for you: for you maybe it has something to do with the internet, violent movies, magazines that feed your materialism, or something else; whatever it is, start to walk away. Satan works through our culture and our flesh to tear us down. You can resist in the power of the Holy Spirit.
- † **[Slide 16: Review]** Let me review the major points James shared with us today:
1. Exposure to the influences of the world, the flesh, and evil can mislead you to live like the unsaved, instead of reflecting God's character and representing God well.
  2. If you are characterized by negative speech habits, this is a sign that you have the wrong type of life philosophy driving you, one that comes from those bad sources. Hostility inside is what brings hostility to our speech.
  3. If you have God as your source of wisdom, you will be humble and your speech will bring about peace and righteousness.
  4. Therefore, you should take steps to limit the influence of the world, the flesh, and evil on your thoughts, and increase the influence of God on your thoughts.
- † **[Slide 17: Temple Mount]** I ask you to give some prayerful thought to these ideas this week, and take steps to ensure you are making decisions based on God's wisdom. Let us learn to be filled and guided by God's Word and the Holy Spirit, so that we can live up to what we believe, to live like people of God.

## Prayer