

CHAPTER 3

The apostle here reproves ambition, and an arrogant magisterial tongue; and shows the duty and advantage of bridling it because of its power to do mischief. Those who profess religion ought especially to govern their tongues (v. 1-12). True wisdom makes men meek, and avoiders of strife and envy: and hereby it may easily be distinguished from a wisdom that is earthly and hypocritical (v. 13 to the end).

~~500~~ JAMES 3:1-12

GOVERNMENT OF THE TONGUE

The foregoing chapter shows how unprofitable and dead faith is without works. It is plainly intimated by what this chapter first goes upon that such a faith is, however, apt to make men conceited and magisterial in their tempers and their talk. Those who set up faith in the manner the former chapter condemns are most apt to run into those sins of the tongue which this chapter condemns. And indeed the best need to be cautioned against a dictating, censorious, mischievous use of their tongues. We are therefore taught,

I. Not to use our tongues so as to lord it over others: *My brethren, be not many masters*, etc., v. 1. These words do not forbid doing what we can to direct and instruct others in the way of their duty or to reprove them in a Christian way for what is amiss; but we must not affect to speak and act as those who are continually assuming the chair, we must not prescribe to one another, so as to make our own sentiments a standard by which to try all others, because God gives various gifts to men, and expects from each according to that measure of light which he gives. “Therefore by not many *masters*” (or *teachers*, as some read it); “do not give yourselves the air of teachers, imposers, and judges, but rather speak with the humility and spirit of learners; do not censure one another, as if all must be brought to your standard.” This is enforced by two reasons.

1. Those who thus set up for judges and censurers *shall receive the greater condemnation*. Our judging others will but make our own judgment the

more strict and severe, ~~400~~ Matthew 7:1, 2. Those who are curious to spy out the faults of others, and arrogant in passing censures upon them, may expect that God will be as extreme in marking what they say and do amiss.

2. Another reason given against such acting the master is because we are all sinners: *In many things we offend all*, v. 2. Were we to think more of our own mistakes and offenses, we should be less apt to judge other people. While we are severe against what we count offensive in others, we do not consider how much there is in us which is justly offensive to them. Self-justifiers are commonly self-deceivers. We are all guilty before God; and those who vaunt it over the frailties and infirmities of others little think how many things they offend in themselves. Nay, perhaps their magisterial deportment, and censorious tongues, may prove worse than any faults they condemn in others. Let us learn to be severe in judging ourselves, but charitable in our judgments of other people.

II. We are taught to govern our tongue so as to prove ourselves perfect and upright men, and such as have an entire government over ourselves: *If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body*. It is here implied that he whose conscience is affected by tongue-sins, and who takes care to avoid them, is an upright man, and has an undoubted sign of true grace. But, on the other hand, *if a man seemeth to be religious* (as was declared in the first chapter) *and bridleth not his tongue*, whatever profession he makes, *that man's religion is vain*. Further, he that offends not in word will not only prove himself a sincere Christian, but a very much advanced and improved Christian. For the wisdom and grace which enable him to rule his tongue will enable him also to rule all his actions. This we have illustrated by two comparisons:

1. The governing and guiding of all the motions of a horse, by the bit which is put into his mouth: *Behold, we put bits into the horses' mouths, that they may obey us, and we turn about their whole body*, v. 3. There is a great deal of brutish fierceness and wantonness in us. This shows itself very much by the tongue: so that this must be bridled; according to ~~400~~ Psalm 39:1, *I will keep my mouth with a bridle* (or, *I will bridle my mouth*) *while the wicked is before me*. The more quick and lively the tongue is, the more should we thus take care to govern it. Otherwise, as an unruly and ungovernable horse runs away with his rider, or throws him, so an unruly tongue will serve those in like manner who have no command

over it. Whereas, let resolution and watchfulness, under the influence of the grace of God, bridle the tongue, and then all the motions and actions of the whole body will be easily guided and overruled.

2. The governing of a ship by the right management of the helm: *Behold also the ships, which though they are so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm whithersoever the governor listeth. Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things*, v. 4, 5. As the helm is a very small part of the ship, so is the tongue a very small part of the body: but the right governing of the helm or rudder will steer and turn the ship as the governor pleases; and a right management of the tongue is, in a great measure, the government of the whole man. There is a wonderful beauty in these comparisons, to show how things of small bulk may yet be of vast use. And hence we should learn to make the due management of our tongues more our study, because, though they are little members, they are capable of doing a great deal of good or a great deal of hurt. Therefore,

III. We are taught to dread an unruly tongue as one of the greatest and most pernicious evils. It is compared to a little fire placed among a great deal of combustible matter, which soon raises a flame and consumes all before it: *Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity*, etc., v. 5, 6. There is such an abundance of sin in the tongue that it may be called *a world of iniquity*. How many defilements does it occasion! How many and dreadful flames does it kindle! *So is the tongue among the members that it defileth the whole body*. Observe hence, There is a great pollution and defilement in sins of the tongue. Defiling passions are kindled, vented, and cherished by this unruly member. And the whole body is often drawn into sin and guilt by the tongue. Therefore Solomon says, *Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin*, Ecclesiastes v. 6. 5:6. The snares into which men are sometimes led by the tongue are insufferable to themselves and destructive of others. *It setteth on fire the course of nature*. The affairs of mankind and of societies are often thrown into confusion, and all is on a flame, by the tongues of men. Some read it, *all our generations are set on fire by the tongue*. There is no age of the world, nor any condition of life, private or public, but will afford examples of this. *And it is set on fire of hell*. Observe hence, Hell has more to do in promoting of fire of the tongue than men are generally aware of. It is from some diabolical designs, that men's tongues are inflamed. The devil is expressly called a liar, a murderer, an

accuser of the brethren; and, whenever men's tongues are employed in any of these ways, they are set on fire of hell. The Holy Ghost indeed once descended in *cloven tongues as of fire*, Acts 2. And, where the tongue is thus guided and wrought upon by a fire from heaven, there it kindleth good thoughts, holy affections, and ardent devotions. But when it is set on fire of hell, as in all undue heats it is, there it is mischievous, producing rage and hatred, and those things which serve the purposes of the devil. As therefore you would dread fires and flames, you should dread contentions, revilings, slanders, lies, and every thing that would kindle the fire of wrath in your own spirit or in the spirits of others. But,

IV. We are next taught how very difficult a thing it is to govern the tongue: *For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed, of mankind. But the tongue can no man tame*, v. 7, 8. As if the apostle had said, "Lions, and the most savage beasts, as well as horses and camels, and creatures of the greatest strength, have been tamed and governed by men: so have birds, notwithstanding their wildness and timorousness, and their wings to bear them up continually out of our reach: even serpents, notwithstanding all their venom and all their cunning, have been made familiar and harmless: and things in the sea have been taken by men, and made serviceable to them. And these creatures have not been subdued nor tamed by miracle only (as the lions crouched to Daniel, instead of devouring him, and ravens fed Elijah, and a whale carried Jonah through the depths of the sea to dry land), but what is here spoken of is something commonly done; not only hath been tamed, but is tamed of mankind. Yet the tongue is worse than these, and cannot be tamed by the power and art which serves to tame these things. No man can tame the tongue without supernatural grace and assistance." The apostle does not intend to represent it as a thing impossible, but as a thing extremely difficult, which therefore will require great watchfulness, and pains, and prayer, to keep it in due order. And sometimes all is too little; *for it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison*. Brute creatures may be kept within certain bounds, they may be managed by certain rules, and even serpents may be so used as to do not hurt with all their poison; but the tongue is apt to break through all bounds and rules, and to spit out its poison on one occasion or other, notwithstanding the utmost care. So that not only does it need to be watched, and guarded, and governed, as much as an unruly beast, or a hurtful and poisonous

creature, but much more care and pains will be needful to prevent the mischievous outbreakings and effects of the tongue. However,

V. We are taught to think of the use we make of our tongues in religion and in the service of God, and by such a consideration to keep it from cursing, censuring, and every thing that is evil on other occasions: *Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, who are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be,* v. 9, 10. How absurd is it that those who use their tongues in prayer and praise should ever use them in cursing, slandering, and the like! If we bless God as our Father, it should teach us to speak well of, and kindly to, all who bear his image. That tongue which addresses with reverence the divine Being cannot, without the greatest inconsistency, turn upon fellow-creatures with reviling brawling language. It is said of the seraphim that praise God, they *dare not bring a railing accusation*. And for men to reproach those who have not only the image of God in their natural faculties, but are renewed after the image of God by the grace of the gospel: this is a most shameful contradiction to all their pretensions of honouring the great Original. *These things ought not so to be;* and, if such considerations were always at hand, surely they would not be. Piety is disgraced in all the shows of it, if there be not charity. That tongue confutes itself which one while pretends to adore the perfections of God, and to refer all things to him, and another while will condemn even good men if they do not just come up to the same words or expressions used by it. Further, to fix this thought, the apostle shows that contrary effects from the same causes are monstrous, and not be found in nature, and therefore cannot be consistent with grace: *Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? Can the fig-tree bear olive-berries, or a vine, figs? Or doth the same spring yield both salt water and fresh?* v. 11, 12. True religion will not admit of contradictions; and a truly religious man can never allow of them either in his words or his actions. How many sins would this prevent, and recover men from, to put them upon being always consistent with themselves!

PROPERTIES OF WISDOM

As the sins before condemned arise from an affectation of being thought more wise than others, and being endued with more knowledge than they, so the apostle in these verses shows the difference between men's pretending to be wise and their being really so, and between the wisdom which is from beneath (from earth or hell) and that which is from above.

I. We have some account of true wisdom, with the distinguishing marks and fruits of it: *Who is a wise man, and endued with knowledge among you? Let him show out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom*, v. 13. A truly wise man is a very knowing man: he will not set up for the reputation of being wise without laying in a good stock of knowledge; and he will not value himself merely upon knowing things, if he has not wisdom to make a right application and use of that knowledge. These two things must be put together to make up the account of true wisdom: who is wise, and endued with knowledge? Now where this is the happy case of any there will be these following things: —

1. A good conversation. If we are wiser than others, this should be evidenced by the goodness of our conversation, not by the roughness or vanity of it. Words that inform, and heal, and do good, are the marks of wisdom; not those that look great, and do mischief, and are the occasions of evil, either in ourselves or others.

2. True wisdom may be known by its works. The conversation here does not refer only to words, but to the whole of men's practice; therefore it is said, Let him show out of a good conversation his works. True wisdom does not lie in good notions or speculations so much as in good and useful actions. Not he who thinks well, or he who talks well, is in the sense of the scripture allowed to be wise, if he do not live and act well.

3. True wisdom may be known by the meekness of the spirit and temper: *Let him show with meekness*, etc. It is a great instance of wisdom prudently to bridle our own anger, and patiently to bear the anger of others. And as wisdom will evidence itself in meekness, so meekness will be a great friend to wisdom; for nothing hinders the regular apprehension, the solid judgment, and impartiality of thought, necessary to our acting

wisely, so much as passion. When we are mild and calm, we are best able to hear reason, and best able to speak it. Wisdom produces meekness, and meekness increases wisdom.

II. We have the glorying of those taken away who are of a contrary character to that now mentioned, and their wisdom exposed in all its boasts and productions: “*If you have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, etc.*,” v. 14-16. Pretend what you will, and think yourselves ever so wise, yet you have abundance of reason to cease your glorying, if you run down love and peace, and give way to bitter envying and strife. Your zeal for truth or orthodoxy, and your boasts of knowing more than others, if you employ these only to make others hateful, and to show your own spite and heart-burnings against them, are a shame to your profession of Christianity, and a downright contradiction to it. Lie not thus against the truth.” Observe,

1. Envy and strife are opposed to the meekness of wisdom. The heart is the seat of both; but envy and wisdom cannot dwell together in the same heart. Holy zeal and bitter envying are as different as the flames of seraphim and the fire of hell.

2. The order of things here laid down. Envy is first and excites strife; strife endeavours to excuse itself by vain-glorying and lying; and then (v. 16) hereupon ensue confusion and every evil work. Those who live in malice, envy, and contention, live in confusion, and are liable to be provoked and hurried to any evil work. Such disorders raise many temptations, strengthen temptations, and involve men in a great deal of guilt. One sin begets another, and it cannot be imagined how much mischief is produced: *there* is every evil work. And is such wisdom as produces these effects to be gloried in? This cannot be without giving the lie to Christianity, and pretending that this wisdom is what it is not. For observe,

3. Whence such wisdom cometh: *It descendeth not from above*, but ariseth from beneath; and, to speak plainly, it is *earthly, sensual, devilish*, v. 15. It springs from earthly principles, acts upon earthly motives, and is intent upon serving earthly purposes. It is sensual indulging the flesh, and making provision to fulfil the lusts and desires of it. Or, according to the original word, *psychike*, it is animal of human — the mere working of natural reason, without any supernatural light. And it is devilish, such

wisdom being the wisdom of devils (to create uneasiness and to do hurt), and being inspired by devils, whose condemnation is pride (⁵¹⁸⁶1 Timothy 3:6), and who are noted in other places of scripture for their wrath, and their accusing the brethren. And therefore those who are lifted up with such wisdom as this must fall into the condemnation of the devil.

III. We have the lovely picture of that wisdom which is from above more fully drawn, and set in opposition to this which is from beneath: *But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, etc.*, v. 17, 18. Observe here, True wisdom is God's gift. It is not gained by conversing with men, nor by the knowledge of the world (as some think and speak), but it comes from above. It consists of these several things: —

- 1.** It is pure, without mixture of maxims or aims that would debase it: and it is free from iniquity and defilements, not allowing of any known sin, but studious of holiness both in heart and life.
- 2.** The wisdom that is from above is peaceable. Peace follows purity, and depends upon it. Those who are truly wise do what they can to preserve peace, that it may not be broken; and to make peace, that where it is lost it may be restored. In kingdoms, in families, in churches, in all societies, and in all interviews and transactions, heavenly wisdom makes men peaceable.
- 3.** It is gentle, not standing upon extreme right in matters of property; not saying nor doing any thing rigorous in points of censure; not being furious about opinions, urging our own beyond their weight nor theirs who oppose us beyond their intention; not being rude and overbearing in conversation, nor harsh and cruel in temper. Gentleness may thus be opposed to all these.
- 4.** Heavenly wisdom is *easy to be entreated, eupeithes*; it is very *persuadable*, either to what is good or from what is evil. There is an easiness that is weak and faulty; but it is not a blamable easiness to yield ourselves to the persuasions of God's word, and to all just and reasonable counsels or requests of our fellow-creatures; no, nor to give up a dispute, where there appears a good reason for it and where a good end may be answered by it.
- 5.** Heavenly wisdom is full of mercy and good fruits, inwardly disposed to every thing that is kind and good, both to relieve those who want and to

forgive those who offend, and actually to do this whenever proper occasions offer.

6. Heavenly wisdom is without partiality. The original word, *adiakritos*, signifies to be without suspicion, or free from judging, making no undue surmises nor differences in our conduct towards one person more than another. The margin reads it, *without wrangling*, not acting the part of sectaries, and disputing merely for the sake of a party; nor censuring others purely on account of their differing from us. The wisest men are least apt to be censurers.

7. That wisdom which is from above is without hypocrisy. It has no disguises nor deceits. It cannot fall in with those managements which the world counts wise, which are crafty and guileful; but it is sincere and open, steady and uniform, and consistent with itself. O that you and I may always be guided by such wisdom as this! that with Paul we may be able to say, *Not with fleshly wisdom, but in simplicity and godly sincerity, by the grace of God, we have our conversation*. And then, *lastly*, true wisdom will go on to sow the fruits of righteousness in peace, and thus, if it may be, to make peace in the world, v. 18. And that which is sown in peace will produce a harvest of joys. Let others reap the fruits of contentions, and all the advantages they can propose to themselves by them; but let us go on peaceably to sow the seeds of righteousness, and we may depend upon it our labour will not be lost. *For light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart; and the work of righteousness shall be peace, and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance for ever*.