

Wisdom & Words - James 3:1-4:12

INTRODUCTION

In the last section we saw that faith and deeds are complementary and that true saving faith will always express itself in deeds of obedience to God and compassion to others. In this section James focuses on a different connection, between wisdom and speech. I have treated this extended section as one because the theme of speech clearly runs through the whole section. In fact, speech is a major issue for James in this highly practical letter, and he has already referred to it twice before we reach this section:

- 1:19: "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry"
- 1:26: "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless"

We can divide this section into three parts:

1. **Why we need wisdom (3:1-12)** – the challenge of the tongue
2. **How to recognise true wisdom (3:13-18)** – a tale of two wisdoms
3. **Wisdom in action (4:1-12)** – wisdom at work in our relationships

WHY WE NEED WISDOM – The Challenge of the Tongue

There are four reasons in this section why we need wisdom. The whole section may be considered as referring especially to Christian teachers, but verses 3-12 in particular should not be restricted in their application only to this group. There are desperately needed challenges here for our speech:

A] We need wisdom because we will be judged for our speech (3:1&2)

Clearly the church James was writing to had a major problem with speech. In fact, people were so eager to use their tongues that there were many people who were eager to be teachers in the church. I am not sure that many churches today, at least in the UK, struggle with this same issue (I wish we had more people willing to consider whether they may be called to be teachers), but the point James is making is still relevant today since the human heart is . As a result, it is here that James begins, with a warning about the great responsibility it is to be a teacher. James' first readers came from a Jewish background and so they would have been used to the Jewish attitude to the Rabbi (a Rabbi is a Jewish teacher). The very word Rabbi is derived from the Hebrew word *rab*, meaning "great", and this indicates the high regard that Rabbis were held in, and it is apparently true that there was a general principle of respecting the Rabbi above one's own parents to such a degree that if both a man's father and the Rabbi were captured it was right to ransom the Rabbi first! It is easy to see how this attitude to Rabbis could have spilled over into the thinking of Jewish Christians so that they would hold teachers in high regard and even desire to be one.

Against this background James issues a stark warning: those who teach (and James includes himself among the number, saying "we who teach") will be judged more strictly. It is clear from the New Testament that Christians will be judged by the Lord at the Judgement Seat of Christ (Romans 14:10; II Corinthians 5:10), in particular for those things done in service in the church (see I Corinthians 3:10-15). Those who teach will face an even stricter judgement because they have influenced the faith and life of others by their teaching. However, James is not being ruthless here and saying that teachers will be held accountable for every little flaw in their teaching – he openly admits in verse two that "we all stumble in many ways". It seems that the judgement James is speaking about is not primarily concerned with doctrinal purity (although it is vital that those who teach are faithfully to God's word), but that his primary concern is the heart of the teacher. All teachers will stumble. Even the apostle admits that he is not infallible. Anyone who is never at fault in what he says would be a perfect man, able to control his whole body (since the tongue, as we will see later, is the most difficult part of the body to control). The real problem lies with the kind of teachers who will never admit that they have stumbled – who put on an air of being absolutely infallible, never wrong, "perfect". The honest servant of God who is gifted to teach in the church will make mistakes, but he will always do four things:

- a) He will approach the task of teaching in humility, submissive to the Spirit of God and seeking to faithfully proclaim God's word rather than merely his own opinion or prejudice
- b) He will encourage God's people to test everything he says against God's word
- c) If he realises he has said something wrong or has been unclear in his meaning he will confess it and seek to correct it
- d) He will seek to integrate what he teaches with his own life – he will be not only a hearer of God's word but also a doer

Speaking of the role of Christian teacher, William Barclay said: “No profession is more liable to beget spiritual and intellectual pride”. How true that is. Therefore, those of us who want to teach or who believe we have been gifted by God for this task must be most carefully to remain humble and sincere. We will truly need wisdom for the task of preaching.

B] We need wisdom because the tongue is hugely influential (3:3-6)

The tongue, according to James is the most influential part of the body although it is only a small part of the body. James uses three pictures to illustrate this point, showing how small things can have an effect vastly greater than their size:

1. **The horse's bit** (v3) – although the horse is a powerful animal, it can be controlled through a small piece of metal strategically placed in its mouth.
2. **The ship's rudder** (v4) – a vast ship driven by strong winds (or in modern terms with a powerful engine) can be turned by a rudder that is comparatively small.
3. **The small spark** (vv5&6) – a small spark of fire can soon spread to cause a forest fire covering many square miles of land. We all know the hurt and scarring that can be caused by unkind words, whether true or false, spoken hastily in anger. The problem is that once a word has been spoken it cannot be taken back. As the North American Indian chief Pontiac, who was a friend of George Washington, reportedly said: “Three things come not back – the spent arrow, the spoken word, and the lost opportunity”.

James then extends the third picture, of fire, to say that the tongue is a “world of evil” among the parts of the body. The tongue is able to influence the whole person even though it is small, and its effect can spread to affect the whole course of the person's life. The problem is that the tongue itself can be set on fire by hell itself. James is warning us how easy it is for the devil to influence the words we speak and through them to destroy our whole life. How true it is that when we speak in ways that are sinful we begin to think more and more in that way too, and because others begin to categorise us as that kind of person this makes it even harder for us to break out of that way of speaking. More often than not our actions follow our words and our words reflect our genuine inner condition.

C] We need wisdom because the tongue is untameable (3:7&8)

James speaks in verse 7 of the taming of wild animals, but says in verse 8 that no one can tame the tongue. The tongue is full of deadly poison and is restless in speaking evil. Of course James is emphasising his point by using hyperbole, but the point is difficult to argue against. So many sins originate with careless or malicious speech. In fact, someone has said that to break almost all of the 10 commandments will probably involve the tongue at some stage. The sins of gossip and slander are among the most destructive of all sins since the reputations and lives of others can be so easily destroyed. The following story illustrates this in a light-hearted fashion:

Four pastors met for a friendly gathering. During the conversation one pastor said, “Our people come to us and pour out their hearts, confess certain sins and needs. Let's do the same. Confession is good for the soul.” In due time all agreed. The first one confessed that he was secretly addicted to alcohol. The second confessed that he had been unfaithful to his wife. The third confessed to having embezzled money from the church offering. When it came to the fourth one, he wouldn't confess. The others pressed him saying, “Come now, we confessed ours. What is your secret or vice?” Finally he answered, “It is gossiping and I can hardly wait to get out of here.”

A joke this may be, but sadly gossip has been the ruin of many churches and individuals. We find ourselves incapable of holding our tongues and so often say things we may later regret or that are inappropriate at that time. As Winston Churchill said:

“The power of man has grown in every sphere except over himself”

D] We need wisdom because the tongue is inconsistent (3:9-12)

In many old Western movies Native Americans are heard to say: “white man speak with forked tongue”. Believe it or not this phrase is taken from the actual words of one Native American chief in the 19th Century who was disappointed by the broke promises made to him by the USA government's representatives. The meaning is clear to us, that the white man said one thing and did another, or that he said different things depending on whether he was speaking to the chief or to the white people of the USA. In these verses James describes an even greater inconsistency in how men use their tongues, and it applies to all races and cultures. With the tongue we praise God and then in the next breath with the same tongue we curse our fellow man who was created in God's image. Because every human being is endowed with dignity as an inheritor of the image of God it is wrong for us to curse (literally to speak ill to) another person. We can imagine the scene as a man stands in church singing songs of praise to God and as soon as he gets into his car he begins to criticise the pastor's sermon, or to gossip about another church member or to verbally abuse his wife or children. It should not be so, says James. He speaks of

two examples from nature which speak of consistency – springs and trees. A spring either produces salt or fresh water – never both – and a tree will only bring forth its own type of fruit. Likewise, our speech.

How many of us can identify with this? Perhaps we have even known someone who was like the character Talkative in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* - "He was a saint abroad and a devil at home". It has been said that we should "So live that you wouldn't be ashamed to sell the family parrot to the town gossip". Do you, like me, struggle with your tongue? Do you find that your words have far-reaching consequences you never foresaw? Do you find that you cannot always bring your tongue under control? Do you feel frustration that you so easily slip from sweet praise of God to bitter criticism of others? The problem is that these two conflicting types of speech reflect the conflict within us between two natures that are at war – the old sinful nature and the new creation being formed in us by the Holy Spirit. If godly speech is to prevail, the Spirit must prevail in us. It will not be enough for us to realise that we need wisdom, we must learn what true wisdom is and how we can have it.

HOW TO RECOGNISE TRUE WISDOM – A Tale of Two Wisdoms

James now addresses those who think they are "wise and understanding". The Greek word translated as "wisdom" is *sophos*. It was the technical term for a teacher or Rabbi, and in both Greek and Old Testament thought it was a quality of the divine nature. In fact, Socrates thought so highly of the term that he refused to be called *sophos* for fear of committing blasphemy and so preferred to be called *philosophos*, a "lover of wisdom". Understanding means knowledge, but wisdom is more than just knowledge, it is the ability to use knowledge in the best possible way for the best possible outcome. Furthermore, in Scriptural terms, wisdom begins with a proper respect for and submission to God. It seems likely that some people in the church to which James was writing, probably the same people who were presuming to be teachers (v1), were boasting about their superior understanding and wisdom. James has no time for such claims if they cannot be backed up by deeds that match true wisdom. This is a consistent feature of James' teaching, that actions must back up claims to be religious (1:26), to have faith (2:14) and now to be wise. James says that wisdom leads to "humility". The actual word here is probably better translated "meekness", a word which must not be misunderstood. It is certainly not weakness; rather it is strength under control – the person who has the ability to retaliate but refuses to do so because he knows that the consequences of retaliating are best avoided. Moses is the ultimate example of this attitude as he is described as the most humble man in the world (Number 12:3). In the case where he was described as meek he had been wrongly attacked by two other leaders (Miriam and Aaron), but instead of retaliating in self-defence he said nothing. God was the one who defended him.

In the following verses James contrasts true (godly) wisdom with the false (worldly) wisdom of those who claimed to be wise:

	Godly Wisdom	Worldly wisdom
Origin	Heaven (v17)	Earthly, unspiritual, of the devil (v15)
Leads to	Meekness (v13)	Pride
Results in attitude	Purity, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, impartial (v17)	Bitter envy and selfish ambition (v14)
Results in speech	Sincerity (v17)	Boasting and lying (v14)
Results in actions	Mercy and good fruit (v17), Peacemaking (v18)	Disorder and every evil practice (v16)

The worldly wisdom of verses 14-16 comes from three influences – the world, the sinful nature and the devil (v15) – and it produces bitter envy and selfish ambition (v14). It is the kind of wisdom that says: "be good to yourself" and "look after number one". It is encapsulated in many self-help books and advice such as the following, which is taken from a BBC website about self-image:

"Be good to yourself – Do you seem to spend your energy looking after everyone else? If so, perhaps it's time to show that you really do respect your body (and whole self) by looking after it. Like anyone else, you deserve some time out, a little pampering, good sleep, a fake tan, seeing a live band or whatever makes you feel good. If you feel good, you're more likely to think and act positively and believe more in your ability to do those things that are important to you"

Now, it is true that we have a responsibility to take care of our bodies and to ensure that our own needs are met as well as helping others, but as Christians we do not show our respect for ourselves by indulging every desire we have, and our aim is not to do what makes us feel good. We start from a different starting point, which is that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit and that our lives are not our own since we were bought with a price (1 Corinthians 6:20). We recognise that our reason for existence is to know and serve God, and we seek first His Kingdom rather than our own needs (Matthew 6:33). The problem with this worldly wisdom is that the envy and selfish ambition it produces lead inevitably to disorder and every evil practice (v16). Because we are constantly comparing ourselves with

others, wishing we had what they have or could do what they do, we do not know our own place in the order of life. We end up more troubled and less content because we always want something else. The result is disharmony in relationships and inner turmoil. It is not long before this leads on to evil practices which are motivated by indulging our own desires or putting others down. Worldly wisdom may start with the kind of thinking that says “but I deserve it” or “I need a little me time”, but this selfishness leads to a multiplication of sin.

The contrast with godly wisdom (described in verses 17&18) could not be more stark. This wisdom has its origin with God Himself, and it is above all else “pure”. In other words this wisdom has correct motives – it is not deceitful or unclean. From this purity flow six other qualities:

- (i) **Peace-loving** – it desires harmony in relationships rather than friction
- (ii) **Considerate** – it is other-focused, recognising the needs of others
- (iii) **Submissive** – it does not stand for its own rights but is willing to learn and to be led
- (iv) **Full of mercy and good fruit** – the results of this wisdom are merciful actions towards others
- (v) **Impartial** – it does not take sides or show favouritism
- (vi) **Sincere** – literally “without hypocrisy” – what you see is what you get

In verse 18 James closes his description of godly wisdom with a proverb: “Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness”. The world is in desperate need of peacemakers. According to John Blanchard, in last 4000 years there have been only 300 years when a major war was not being fought somewhere in world. Christ pronounced blessing on the peacemakers, saying that they bear the likeness of their heavenly Father (Matthew 5:9). God is the ultimate peacemaker, having reconciled us to Himself through the cross of Christ, and He has entrusted to us the ministry of reconciliation (II Corinthians 5:18). Our lives must be living examples of peace with God and dedicated to seeking peace between men. We must make every effort within our power to live at peace with everyone (Romans 12:18). How true is this of my life? Do I long for harmony? Do I care more about seeing others coming into peace with God and experiencing peace in their live more than I care about my own reputation or pleasure? Worldly wisdom is the enemy of peace – it leads to friction between people and turmoil within. Godly wisdom loves peace and seeks to extend peace to others. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness. Of course, that will only appeal to you if it is righteousness you desire! Perhaps our prayer should be the same as the prayer attributed to Francis of Assisi’s (it may be familiar to you from the song “Make me a Channel of Your Peace”):

Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.
O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.

WISDOM IN ACTION – Wisdom at work in our Relationships

In 4:1-12 James describes the outworking of the godly wisdom he has described in 3:17&18 in terms of three key relationships:

a) Relationships in the church (4:1-3, 11-12) – peace not war

James asks the question, what causes fights and quarrels (literally “wars and battles”) in the church. We might answer that it is often over doctrinal issues or ideas of how things should be done. We might say it is simply a matter of personality clash – different people with different ways of thinking who can’t quite get on with one another. James is not so generous! He basically pins it down to selfishness! In my experience there are three major causes of fights and quarrels in the church:

- (i) Wanting the wrong thing
- (ii) Wanting the right thing for wong motives
- (iii) Wanting the right thing at the wrong time

Notice the common word in all three causes: “wanting”. This is what James pins it down to in these verses – “You want something but you don’t get it”. Problems arise in churches when people put their own desires first. The word translated “desires” in verse 1 is really the same word that is translated “pleasures” in verse 3. In other words, the problem that James says is at the root of the

struggles within churches is selfishness – it is worldly wisdom that seeks one's own happiness rather than the needs of others. The results are disastrous, both in terms of relationships with one another and with God. They "kill" (v2) is presumably not literal, but alludes to Christ's teaching that hatred equates to murder (Matthew 5:21&22, I John 3:15). They don't get what they want because they don't ask God, but even when do ask Him they still don't get it because they are only asking for selfish reasons. God is not our servant to give us what we want, as we will see later, but neither is the church. My approach to church should never be what I get out of it but what I am contributing to it in terms of peacemaking and righteousness.

In verses 11 and 12 James returns to the issue of relationships with our brothers. He warns is not to "slander" one another. The actual word means literally "speak against". In other words, it could even refer to something true that is spoken in a harsh way as well as lies told to damage the person's reputation. James is really saying "do not say anything to or about your brother that is intended to cause him harm either directly or indirectly". This forbids all forms of gossip, slander, verbal attack, sarcastic comments, unloving rebukes and untruths. The reason for this prohibition is interesting – it is because when we speak against our brother we are speaking against the law and judging it. What Law does James mean? It may refer to the whole Old Testament Law, which is being judged because I am taking on myself the role of judge and so challenging the authority of the Lawgiver, God (v12). On the other hand, it could be a reference specifically to Leviticus 19:18 ("Love your neighbour as yourself") or to Christ's new commandment to love one another as He has loved us (John 13:34). The connection to Leviticus seems most likely, as James is probably linking back to 2:8 where he called this the "royal law". However, whatever he means by "the law", James' meaning in v12 is crystal clear. He says that judgement is God's prerogative, and we have no right to judge our neighbour because:

- (i) We did not institute the Law – there is only one Lawgiver
- (ii) We are not the true Judge – we cannot judge fairly
- (iii) We lack the power to execute judgement of the Law effectively – we cannot save and destroy

Who, therefore, am I to judge my neighbour? I must entrust judgement to God. The real issue here is submission to the Lawgiver and Judge! James has dealt with it already in verses 7-10, but we will come to those verses later.

b) Relationships with the world (4:4&5) – no compromise

The kind of selfishness James described in vv1-3 is basically friendship with the world. In verses 4 and 5 James polarises the issue – friendship with the world (thinking in a worldly way) is enmity with God. It is impossible to have both God and the world! This echoes Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6:24 about the impossibility of serving two masters (in that case God and money). So often we compromise our commitment to God by serving our own passions and living for those things the world places value on. We think we have done our duty to God by going to church on a Sunday and perhaps another day as well, but Monday to Friday seems to be lived to the beat of a different drum. So many things about our lifestyle really betray the fact that we love the world. We love money, power, status, popularity, possessions and fame. We show this love in many ways, both in how we spend our time and in what we choose to read about, watch movies about or google! In verse 4 James calls them literally "adulteresses". He uses the female not because the problem is primarily one of women but because it refers back to the Old Testament picture of Israel as the wife of God (Jeremiah 31:32) who was unfaithful to Him (e.g. Hosea 1-3, Isaiah 1:21). This concept carries over into the New Testament, where the Church is described as the bride of Christ (II Corinthians 11:2, Ephesians 5:23-32, Revelation 19:1-10, 21:2). In other words, James is saying that we collectively are Christ's bride, and when we choose to love the world we are committing spiritual adultery. This is serious stuff!!! Notice that James does say that if we "choose" to be a friend of the world we become God's enemy. Worldliness is a choice we make. The decisions we take determine the course of our heart. We cannot say that we are worshipping God with all our being but then make choices that reflect a different priority.

Verse 5 is a notoriously difficult verse to understand. James is not quoting directly from Scripture, but he is speaking of a Scriptural idea. There are several possible interpretations, all of which are possible readings of the Greek, and three of which are offered by the NIV:

- a) NIV Text – suggests that the saying is about our spirit being envious – in other words a reference back to verse 14. I do not favour this reading, as the wording therefore suggests that God is responsible for our envy because this is the nature of the spirit He made in us. It is difficult to see what Scripture this would refer to, and it does not seem to follow on clearly from verse 4.
- b) NIV Footnote 2 – suggests that the spirit in the verse is not our spirit but the Holy Spirit whom God has put in us, and that He is the one who longs jealously (the word translated "envy" in the

NIV Text can also mean jealous longing). I think this reading is less likely as it would be James' only reference to the Holy Spirit although the meaning is very similar to the third option.

- c) NIV Footnote 1 – suggests that it is God who is jealously longing for the devotion of our spirit. I favour this reading because it would echo Old Testament Scriptures like Exodus 20:5 and 34:24 which speak of God as a jealous God, and it would refer back to the idea of adultery in verse 4. We are used to thinking of jealousy as a wholly negative thing, but in a marriage relationship jealousy is perfectly appropriate in the sense of demanding special loyalty from the spouse. God has every right to jealously expect our sole devotion, just as a wife has every right to expect that her husband will be faithful to her

So, then, I must ask myself the question: am I flirting with the world? Who is my real loyalty to?

c) Relationship with God (4:6-10) – surrender

Finally we come to the passage that is at the centre of this whole section. In these verses James tells us how to receive the godly wisdom he has been extolling. Firstly he says in response to the challenge of verses 4&5 that God "gives us more grace". In other words, God, the jealous husband who has been wronged by our shameful adultery, pours out more good gifts upon us. Just as God taught Hosea to do to his unfaithful wife Gomer, so God does to us. Even though we flirt with the world and seek our own pleasure, God still richly blesses us. What a great God He is. However, if we are to know this grace in action in our lives we cannot continue in our pride. The word translated "proud" in verse 6 means literally "one who shows himself above other people". Such pride cannot know God's grace because it cuts itself off from God for three reasons (Barclay):

- (i) It does not know its own need – it believes in self-sufficiency
- (ii) It cherishes its own independence
- (iii) It does not recognise its own sin – it loves self, not God

This pride can be a desperately deceptive thing. As William Barclay says, "It certainly means *haughtiness*, but the man who suffers from it might well appear to be walking in downcast humility, while all the time there was in his heart a vast contempt for all his fellow-men". Really it means to be so sure of one's own position that everyone else seems to be wrong. The proud person will always see the faults in others first. Such a person is opposed by God, but the humble receive God's grace. It is possible for us to live faithful lives, to have godly wisdom, but only if we will humble ourselves. Humility means to submit to God's will rather than seeking our own pleasure – it means to surrender to God in every part of our being. Humility is strong – in the face of a person who is wholly surrendered to God the devil must flee – we can resist his influence as he tries to lead us towards worldly wisdom. Humility flows from repentance and in verses 7-10 James issues 10 commands. The tense he uses calls for an immediate response. We must wash our hands, purify our hearts, grieve, mourn and wail, change our laughter to mourning and humble ourselves before God. There is no point asking God to make you humble – you need to surrender to Him. Just as worldliness is a choice (v4), so humility is a choice. Augustine once said: "For those who would learn God's ways, humility is the first thing, humility is the second, and humility is the third." Without humility there can be no godly wisdom. There is a time in the Christian experience when joy and laughter is inappropriate. There must be times of grief and mourning for sin. Once we have repented then of course we will know the joy Christ brings, and this should overflow from our lives and in our praise of God together, but I sometimes wonder where the repentance is in the songs we sing and the way we worship when we meet together. The amazing promise is that when we draw near to God in repentance He will draw near to us, and when we humble ourselves before Him He will lift us up to become His peacemakers. Let us examine ourselves today and humble ourselves before God so that He can lift us up to do His will and to witness for Him.

CONCLUSION – Choose humility, choose godly wisdom

We began this section by recognising a big problem we all share – the challenge of the tongue which seems so influential and untameable. Then we looked at the underlying issue of wisdom, contrasting worldly wisdom with godly wisdom. Lastly we learned that godly wisdom begins when we humble ourselves before God and renew our devotion to Him as our soul master. Brothers and sisters, it is time to stop compromising with the world. It is time to crucify the old nature with its desires. It is time to choose humility and to live out the godly wisdom that will bring purity to our minds and speech so that we can become peacemakers who will raise a harvest of righteousness. Today, then, "come near to God and He will come near to you".