

3:1a *Let Not Many of You Become Teachers*

Christ Chose Only Twelve.

Hilary of Arles: The apostle here prohibits a large number of teachers, for even our Lord Jesus Christ chose only a few for this role. He had only twelve disciples, and not all of them went on to become teachers of the gospel. Introductory Tractate on the Letter of James.¹

3:1b *Teachers Judged with Greater Strictness*

Let Words and Deeds Correspond.

Chrysostom: Teaching without setting an example is not only worthless but also brings great punishment and judgment on the one who leads his life with such heedlessness, throwing out the pride of those who do not want to practice what they preach. So reject the teaching of those who teach without setting an example and pass judgment on them. Yet if there is no contradiction between what he says and what he does, and he is able to control his entire body, then do not condemn him. For if he teaches such things and surrounds the right words of his faith with outstanding deeds corresponding to it, it is clear that he is fully in charge of his body and has no love for the things of the world. Catena.³

More Severe Judgment.

Oecumenius: If a person does not practice what he preaches, he will be judged more severely, since his teaching has borne no fruit. For such a person is condemned along with the one who has sinned with his tongue. Commentary on James.⁴

3:2 *We All Make Mistakes*

Our Imperfection.

Augustine: Who then would ever dare to call himself perfect? Sermons 23.⁷

Allaying God's Judgment.

Severus of Antioch: If one of Christ's own disciples can talk like this, ⁸ we must make it our business to press toward the opposite direction, so as to allay the God and judge of all things for those times when in

the weakness of our humanity we have fallen into wrongdoing, failing to pay heed to our salvation. Catena.⁹

Avoid Foolish Talk.

Cyril of Alexandria: The effective proof of a sound mind and perfect thought is to have nothing faulty on our tongue and to keep our mouths closed when necessary. For it is better to be guided by worthy speech, which is able to know and to express the fullness of all praise. For the most useful talent is to be able to speak wisdom when talking about how to live well. Foolish talk should be foreign to the saints. Catena.¹⁰

Pray for Healing.

Pachomius: We all fall very often, but let us pray to the merciful God, and if we watch over ourselves in the future, he will heal us. Communion 1.68.¹¹

Perfect Silence.

Hilary of Arles: Perfection consists of righteousness, and silence is the way to achieve it. This is why James connects perfection with keeping one's mouth shut. Introductory Tractate on the Letter of James.¹²

Sins of the Tongue.

Oecumenius: James shows from the faults of the tongue that there is nobody who goes through life without sinning. From this he proves that nobody is perfect. Commentary on James.¹⁵

3:3 Bits into the Mouths of Horses

So God Tames Humanity.

Augustine: Note that the comparison is taken from the beasts which we are able to tame. The horse does not tame itself, nor does a man do so. A man is needed in order to tame a horse, and in the same way, God is needed in order to tame a man. Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount 55.2.¹⁶

3:4 *The Great Ship's Small Rudder*

Guiding the Tongue.

Andreas: James says that if we can contain the spirits of a horse by putting a bit into his mouth and control the direction of a ship with a small rudder, how much more ought we to be able to guide the tongue by right words toward doing good. Catena.¹⁹

The Analogies Work Together.

Oecumenius: This confirms what has been said about the tongue and adds something more to it, for the person who can domesticate an animal in so simple a manner will also master that which is more difficult to control. It is probable that James chose this example because somebody asked him why it was so difficult to contain something as small as the tongue. The text also implies that we should go on from merely controlling our tongues and find a higher use for them. For just as a domesticated horse is then used for better purposes, as is a ship under control, so our tongues ought to be used for saying the right thing at the right time. Commentary on James.²⁰

3:5 *The Power of the Tongue*

The Tongue and the Body.

Didymus the Blind: In attacking what they say, James singles out the tongue, which is the instrument of speech. But since their thoughts are present in the body as a whole, it ought to be understood that his remarks apply to the entire body. Commentary on James.²¹

The Tongue Knows Great Good and Great Evil.

Jerome: The sword kills the body, but the tongue kills the soul. The tongue knows no moderation—either it is a great good or it is a great evil. It is a great good when it acknowledges that Christ is God, and a great evil when it denies that. Let no one deceive himself into thinking that he has never sinned, for if I have sinned, it is with my tongue. What more monstrous sin is there than blasphemy against God? The devil did not fall because he committed theft, murder or adultery; he fell because of his tongue. He said: “I will scale the heavens; above the stars I will set up my throne, I will be like the most high.”²² Sermons 41.²³

The Misery of the Tongue.

Jerome: The more the tongue has sinned, the more it is miserable. Sermons 86.²⁴

3:6 *The Tongue Is a Fire*

Sins of the Tongue Are Many.

Basil the Great: If you love life, fulfill the commandment of life. “The one who loves me,” said Jesus, “keeps my commandments,” ²⁶ and the first commandment is this: “Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking guile.” ²⁷ For the sin which is caused by the tongue is very active and many-sided, being active in wrath, lust, hypocrisy, judgment and deception. Do we need to recall the many names which are given to sins of the tongue? For from it come slanders, coarse jokes, idiocies, irrelevant accusations, bitterness, swearing, false witness—the tongue is the creator of all these evil things and more. Catena.²⁸

Guarding the Tongue.

Chrysostom: Therefore, guard the tip of the tongue, for it is like a majestic stallion. For if you put a bit in its mouth and teach it to walk in order, it adapts to this and is satisfied. But if you let it run wild, it becomes the vehicle of the devil and his angels. Catena.²⁹

Leading into Rashness.

Andreas: James did not say that the course of our life ignites the tongue but that the tongue ignites the course of our life. For it causes us to make wrong decisions and leads us into rashness. By it, our life is thrown off course and subjected to many kinds of wickedness. Catena.³¹

Gangrene to the Soul.

Pachomius: The bragging tongue fouls the whole body and is gangrene to the soul. Communion 3.38.³²

Iniquity Burns.

Hilary of Arles: Iniquity stains us in the same way as wood is scorched by fire, and hell burns as if it were a fire. Introductory Tractate on the Letter of James.³³

A World of Evil.

Oecumenius: The tongue is described as a “world” of evil, because the word world implies a large quantity. The phrase should thus be interpreted as “a great evil.” Commentary on James.³⁴

3:7 Taming the Animals

Controlling the Tongue.

Andreas: James says that it is unnatural that we should be able to domesticate all the creatures but not be able to control our own tongues. Catena.³⁶

3:8 Taming the Tongue

Capable of Wounding.

Chrysostom: The tongue is a piercing sword. But let us not wound others with it; rather let us cut off our own gangrene. Catena.³⁷

Taming the Tongue Harder Than Taming the Beast.

Augustine: I do not believe that this passage can bear the interpretation which Pelagius wants to put on it. He says that this is stated as a reproach, as if one were to say: “Is no one therefore able to control his tongue?” As if it were easier to tame the tongue than to tame wild beasts. But I do not believe that this is the meaning. If James had wanted to say that, he would have done so, but instead he was determined to show what a great evil a man’s tongue can be, so great that it cannot be tamed by anyone, even though that is not true of wild beasts. He said this not in order that we should tolerate this evil but in order that we should ask for divine grace to tame our tongue. On Nature and Grace 15 (16).³⁸

The Sharpness of the Sword.

Hesychius: Just as a sword, if it is sharpened, is more easily able to kill, so the tongue, which has great difficulty in keeping itself quiet and cannot easily be controlled, becomes more insolent if it learns from bad people how to deceive, how to slander and how to incriminate. Catena.³⁹

3:10 Blessing and Cursing

The Tongue Not for Cursing.

Andreas: Nothing bitter should come out of a mouth which has uttered the praise of so great a mystery, nor should the tongue say anything which is unworthy of a holy mouth. Let us keep it pure and not use it to curse. For if those who rail against God will not inherit the kingdom, how much more will this be true of those who curse? Catena.⁴⁰

3:11 Good and Bad Water from the Same Spring

Sweet Spring Water.

Hilary of Arles: The spring is the heart of man, the flowing stream of water is his speech, and the opening through which it pours is his mouth. The sweet water is sound doctrine, while the bitter water is just the opposite. Introductory Tractate on the Letter of James.⁴¹

3:12 Can a Fig Tree Produce Olives?

Mixing Human and Divine Things.

Andreas: For being power-hungry and filled with the wisdom of the world, they preached with the force and zeal of orthodox teachers, gathering a crowd with no trouble at all and deceiving them, mixing human things with the divine, so that the hearers might be dazzled by the newness of what was being said. That is how heresy arose. But James forbids that kind of teaching and whatever comes from a wisdom which is not divine but diabolical. He said all this in order to praise good teaching, the wisdom which comes from humility in words and in useful deeds. Catena.⁴³