

Adam Clarke:

Introduction

They are exhorted not to be many masters, James 3:1. And to bridle the tongue, which is often an instrument of much evil, James 3:2-12. The character and fruits of true and false wisdom, James 3:13-18.

Verse 1

Be not many masters - Do not affect the teacher's office, for many wish to be teachers who have more need to learn. There were many teachers or rabbins among the Jews, each affecting to have The truth, and to draw disciples after him. We find a caution against such persons, and of the same nature with that of St. James, in Pirkey Aboth, c. i. 10: Love labor, and hate the rabbin's office.

This caution is still necessary; there are multitudes, whom God has never called, and never can call, because he has never qualified them for the work, who earnestly wish to get into the priest's office. And of this kind, in opposition to St. James, we have many masters - persons who undertake to show us the way of salvation, who know nothing of that ways and are unsaved themselves. These are found among all descriptions of Christians, and have been the means of bringing the ministerial office into contempt. Their case is awful; they shall receive greater condemnation than common sinners; they have not only sinned in thrusting themselves into that office to which God has never called them, but through their insufficiency the flocks over whom they have assumed the mastery perish for lack of knowledge, and their blood will God require at the watchman's hand. A man may have this mastery according to the law of the land, and yet not have it according to the Gospel; another may affect to have it according to the Gospel, because he dissents from the religion of the state, and not have it according to Christ. Blockheads are common, and knaves and hypocrites may be found everywhere.

Verse 2

In many things we offend all - We all stumble or trip. Dr. Barrow very properly observes: As the general course of life is called a way, and particular actions steps, so going on in a regular course of right action is walking uprightly; and acting amiss, tripping or stumbling. There are very few who walk so closely with God, and inoffensively with men, as never to stumble; and although it is the privilege of every follower of God to be sincere and without offense to the day of Christ, yet few of them are so. Were this unavoidable, it would be useless to make it a subject of regret; but as every man may receive grace from his God to enable him to walk in every respect uprightly, it is to be deplored that so few live up to their privileges. Some have produced these words as a proof that no man can live without sinning against God; for James himself, a holy apostle speaking of himself, all the apostles, and the whole Church of Christ, says, In many things we offend all. This is a very bad and dangerous doctrine; and, pushed to its consequences, would greatly affect the credibility of the whole Gospel system. Besides, were the doctrine as true as it is dangerous and false, it is foolish to ground it upon such a text; because St. James, after the common mode of all teachers, includes himself in his addresses to his hearers. And were we to suppose that where he appears by the use of the plural pronoun to include himself, he means to be thus understood, we must then grant that himself was one of those many teachers who were to receive a great condemnation, James 3:1; that he was a horse-breaker, because he says, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us, James 3:3; that his tongue was a world of iniquity, and set on fire of hell, for he says, so is the tongue among our members, James 3:6; that he cursed men, wherewith curse we men, James 3:9. No man possessing common sense could imagine that James, or any man of even tolerable morals, could be guilty of those things. But some of those were thus guilty to whom he wrote; and to soften his reproofs, and to cause them to enter the more deeply into their hearts, he appears to include himself in his own censure; and yet not one of his readers would understand him as being a brother delinquent.

Offend not in word, the same is a perfect man - To understand this properly we must refer to the caution St. James gives in the preceding verse: Be not many masters or teachers - do not affect that for which you are not qualified, because in your teaching, not knowing the heavenly doctrine, ye may sin against the analogy of faith. But, says he, if any man offend not, trip not, in doctrine, teaching the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, the same is a man fully instructed in Divine things: How often the term word, which we render word, is used to express doctrine, and the doctrine of the Gospel, we have seen in many parts of the preceding comment. And how often the word perfect, which we translate perfect, is used to signify an adult Christian, one thoroughly instructed in the doctrines of the Gospel, may be seen in various parts of St. Paul's writings. See among others, 1 Corinthians 2:6; 1 Corinthians 14:20; Ephesians 4:13; Philemon 3:15; Colossians 4:12; Hebrews 5:14. The man, therefore, who advanced no false doctrine, and gave no imperfect view of any of the great truths of Christianity; that man proved himself thereby to be thoroughly instructed in Divine things; to be no novice, and consequently, among the many teachers, to be a perfect master, and worthy of the sacred vocation.

interpretations of it:

1. St. James does not intend to express the whole circle of human affairs, so much affected by the tongue of man; but rather the penal wheel of the Greeks, and not unknown to the Jews, on which they were accustomed to extend criminals, to induce them to confess, or to punish them for crimes; under which wheels, fire was often placed to add to their torments. In the book, De Maccabaeis, attributed to Josephus, and found in Haverkamp's edition, vol. ii., p. 497-520, where we have the account of the martyrdom of seven Hebrew brothers, in chap. ix, speaking of the death of the eldest, it is said: *They cast him on the wheel, over which they extended him; they put coals under it, and strongly agitated the wheel.* And of the martyrdom of the sixth brother it is said, cap. 11: *They brought him to the wheel, on which, having distended his limbs, and broken his joints, they scorched him with the fire placed underneath; and with sharp spits heated in the fire, they pierced his sides, and burned his bowels.*

The fire and the wheel are mentioned by Achilles Tatius, lib. 7, p. 449. *Having stripped me of my garments, I was carried aloft, some bringing scourges, others the fire and the wheel.* Now as *life*, often signifies life, then the wheel of life will signify the miseries and torments of life. To set on fire the wheel of life is to increase a man's torments; and to be set on fire from hell implies having these miseries rendered more active by diabolic agency; or, in other words, bad men, instigated by the devil, through their lies and calumnies, make life burdensome to the objects of their malicious tongues. The wheel and the fire, so pointedly mentioned by St. James, make it probable that this sort of punishment might have suggested the idea to him. See more in Kypke.

2. But is it not possible that by the wheel of life St. James may have the circulation of the blood in view? Angry or irritating language has an astonishing influence on the circulation of the blood: the heart beats high and frequent; the blood is hurried through the arteries to the veins, through the veins to the heart, and through the heart to the arteries again, and so on; an extraordinary degree of heat is at the same time engendered; the eyes become more prominent in their sockets; the capillary vessels suffused with blood; the face flushed; and, in short, the whole wheel of nature is set on fire of hell. No description can be more natural than this: but it may be objected that this intimates that the circulation of the blood was known to St. James. Now supposing it does, is the thing impossible? It is allowed by some of the most judicious medical writers, that Solomon refers to this in his celebrated portraiture of old age, particularly in Ecclesiastes 12:6: *Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern.* Here is the very wheel of life from which St. James might have borrowed the idea; and the different times evidently refer to the circulation of the blood, which might be as well known to St. James as the doctrine of the parallax of the sun. See on James 1:17 (note).

3. It is true, however, that the rabbins use the term *gilgal toledoth*, the wheel of generations, to mark the successive generations of men: and it is possible that St. James might refer to this; as if he had said: *The tongue has been the instrument of confusion and misery through all the ages of the world.* But the other interpretations are more likely.

Verse 7

Every kind of beasts - That is, every species of wild beasts, is tamed, i.e. brought under man's power and dominion. Beasts, birds, serpents, and some kinds of fishes have been tamed so as to be domesticated; but every kind, particularly of sea monsters, has not been thus tamed; but all have been subjected to the power of man; both the shark and whale become an easy prey to the skill and influence of the human being. I have had the most credible information, when in the Zetland Isles, of the seals being domesticated, and of one that would pass part of his time on shore, receive his allowance of milk, etc., from the servants, go again to sea, and return, and so on.

Verse 8

But the tongue wan no man tame - No cunning, persuasion, or influence has ever been able to silence it. Nothing but the grace of God, excision, or death, can bring it under subjection.

It is an unruly evil - An evil that cannot be restrained; it cannot be brought under any kind of government; it breaks all bounds.

4. Salt water cannot be made sweet. That is, according to the ordinary operations of nature, these things are impossible. Chemical analysis is out of the question.

Verse 13

Who is a wise man - One truly religious; who, although he can neither bridle nor tame other men's tongues, can restrain his own.

And endued with knowledge - And qualified to teach others.

Let him show - Let him by a holy life and chaste conversation show, through meekness and gentleness, joined to his Divine information, that he is a Christian indeed; his works and his spirit proving that God is in him of a truth; and that, from the fullness of a holy heart, his feet walk, his hands work; and his tongue speaks. We may learn from this that genuine wisdom is ever accompanied with meekness and gentleness. Those proud, overbearing, and disdainful men, who pass for great scholars and eminent critics, may have learning, but they have not wisdom. Their learning implies their correct knowledge of the structure of language, and of composition in general; but wisdom they have none, nor any self-government. They are like the blind man who carried a lantern in daylight to keep others from jostling him in the street. That learning is not only little worth, but despicable, that does not teach a man to govern his own spirit, and to be humble in his conduct towards others.

Verse 14

If ye have bitter envying and strife - If ye be under the influence of an unkind, fierce, and contemptuous spirit, even while attempting or pretending to defend true religion, do not boast either of your exertions or success in silencing an adversary; ye have no religion, and no true wisdom, and to profess either is to lie against the truth. Let all writers on what is called polemic (fighting, warring) divinity lay this to heart. The pious Mr. Herbert gives excellent advice on this subject: -

Be calm in arguing, for fierceness makes Error a fault, and truth discourtesy;
Why should I feel another man's mistakes More than his sickness or his poverty?
In love I should; but anger is not love,
Nor wisdom neither; therefore g-e-n-t-l-y m-o-v-e.

Verse 15

This wisdom descendeth not from above - God is not the author of it, because it is bitter - not meek. See at the end of this chapter.

Is earthly - Having this life only in view.

Sensual - Animal - having for its object the gratification of the passions and animal propensities.

Devilish - Demoniacal - inspired by demons, and maintained in the soul by their indwelling influence.

Verse 16

For where envying and strife is - Zeal - fiery, inflammatory passion, and contention - altercations about the different points of the law, of no use for edification, such as those mentioned, Titus 3:9. The Jews were the most intolerant of all mankind; it was a maxim with them to kill those who would not conform to their law; and their salvation they believed to be impossible. This has been the spirit of Popery, and of the Romish Church at large; in vain do they attempt to deny it; they have written it in characters of blood and fire even in this country, (England), when they were possessed of political power. With them it is still an established maxim, that out of their Church there is no redemption; and fire and faggot have been in that Church legal means of conversion or extinction. In the short popish reign of Mary in this country, besides multitudes who suffered by fine, imprisonment, confiscation, etc., two hundred and seventy-seven were burnt alive, among whom were one archbishop, four bishops, twenty-one clergymen, eight lay gentlemen, eighty-four tradesmen, one hundred husbandmen, fifty-five women, and four children! O earth! thou hast not drunk their blood; but their ashes have been strewed on the face of the field.

Verse 17

The wisdom that is from above - The pure religion of the Lord Jesus, bought by his blood, and infused by his Spirit. See the rabbinical meaning of this phrase at the end of this chapter.

Is first pure - ἀρίστη καὶ ἁγία καὶ καθάρη. Chaste, holy, and clean.

Peaceable - ἡσυχία καὶ εἰρήνη. Living in peace with others, and promoting peace among men.

Gentle - ἡπιότατος καὶ ἰσοφύς. Meek, modest, of an equal mind, taking every thing in good part, and putting the best construction upon all the actions of others.

Easy to be entreated - ἡπιότατος καὶ ἰσοφύς. Not stubborn nor obstinate; of a yielding disposition in all indifferent things; obsequious, docile.

Full of mercy - Ready to pass by a transgression, and to grant forgiveness to those who offend, and performing every possible act of kindness.

Good fruits - Each temper and disposition producing fruits suited to and descriptive of its nature.

Without partiality - ἰσοφύς καὶ ἰσοκλήτος. Without making a difference - rendering to every man his due; and being never swayed by self-interest, worldly honor, or the fear of man; knowing no man after the flesh. One of the Itala has it irreprehensible.

Without hypocrisy - ἰσοκλήτος καὶ ἰσοφύς. Without dissimulation; without pretending to be what it is not; acting always in its own character; never working under a mask. Seeking nothing but God's glory, and using no other means to attain it than those of his own prescribing.

Verse 18

And the fruit of righteousness is sown - The whole is the principle of righteousness in the soul, and all the above virtues are the fruits of that righteousness.

Is sown in peace - When the peace of God rules the heart, all these virtues and graces grow and flourish abundantly.

Of them that make peace - The peace-makers are continually recommending this wisdom to others, and their own conduct is represented as a sowing of heavenly seed, which brings forth Divine fruit. Perhaps sowing in peace signifies sowing prosperously - being very successful. This is not only the proper disposition for every teacher of the Gospel, but for every professed follower of the Lord Jesus.

Some render this verse, which is confessedly obscure, thus: And the peaceable fruits of righteousness are sown for the practisers of peace. He who labors to live peaceably shall have peace for his reward.

1. Almost the whole of the preceding chapter is founded on maxims highly accredited in the rabbinical writings, and without a reference to those writings it would have been impossible, in some cases, to have understood St. James's meaning. There is one phrase, the rabbinical meaning and use of which I have reserved for this place, viz.. The wisdom that is from above. This is greatly celebrated among them by the terms חכמה עליונה (chocmah elyonah), the supernal wisdom. This they seem to understand to be a peculiar inspiration of the Almighty, or a teaching communicated immediately by the angels of God. In Sohar, Yalcut Rubeni, fol. 19, Rabbi Chiya said: "The wisdom from above was in Adam more than in the supreme angels, and he knew all things." In Sohar Chadash, fol. 35, it is said concerning Enoch, "That the angels were sent from heaven, and taught him the wisdom that is from above." Ibid. fol. 42,4: "Solomon came, and he was perfect in all things, and strongly set forth the praises of the wisdom that is from above." See more in Schoettgen. St. James gives us the properties of this wisdom, which are not to be found in such detail in any of the rabbinical writers. It is another word for the life of God in the soul of man, or true religion; it is the teaching of God in the human heart, and he who has this not is not a child of God; for it is written, All thy children shall be taught of the Lord.

2. To enjoy the peace of God in the conscience, and to live to promote peace among men, is to answer the end of our creation, and to enjoy as much happiness ourselves as the present state of things can afford. They who are in continual broils live a wretched life; and they who love the life of the salamander must share no small portion of the demoniacal nature. In domestic society such persons are an evil disease; therefore a canker in the Church, and a pest in the state.