

JAMES: CHAPTER THREE

Preface:

The third chapter of James continues his address to Messianic Jews who accumulate at the Jerusalem synagogue and by circulation to Messianic Jews scattered outside Palestine. Both are the progeny of Jewish Diasporas documented in the Tanakh.

Both groups are addressed by the masculine phrase, 'Ἀδελφοί μου (*Adelphoi mou*): “My brethren,” at the beginning of the first paragraph of chapters 1, 2, and 3.

The subject of the first chapter is the maintenance of happiness in the face of trials and temptations. The second chapter reveals the Royal Law and the imperative of having working objects for one’s faith. The third chapter takes up the serious problems caused by committing sins of the tongue. I have several Bibles, each assigning a descriptive subtitle to chapter three:

1. “Reality of Faith Tested by **Control** of the Tongue” (C. I. Scofield, *The Scofield Study Bible*).
2. “Sins of the Tongue: Its **Bridling**” (Charles C. Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible*).
3. “**Bridle** the Tongue” (John A. Hertel, *The Holy Bible*).
4. “**Taming** the Tongue” (D. A. Carson, *The Biblical Theology Study Bible*).
5. “**Taming** the Tongue” (*Archaeological Study Bible*).
6. “The **Power** of the Tongue” (The NET Bible).
7. “The **Christian** and the Tongue” (Finis J. Dake, *Dake’s Annotated Reference Bible*).

The noun *tongue* is replete in both testaments. In the Tanakh, the Hebrew word is לָשׁוֹן (*lashon*) while in the Greek New Testament it is γλῶσσα (*glōssa*). The uses of the words include a number of applications, but we will primarily emphasize speech, used similarly in both languages.

1. The use of the noun *lashon*, in the Tanakh:

לִשׁוֹן A common noun meaning tongue, language. It is used literally as a part of a person (Exodus 4:10) or animal: (Exodus 11:7); metaphorically of the tongue of the Lord as a consuming fire (Isaiah 30:27).

The tongue is the instrument of speech (2 Samuel 23:2). Being heavy of tongue meant to speak poorly (Exodus 4:10). The tongue is a source of flattery, smooth talk (Psalm 5:9); falsehood (Psalm 78:36); a lying tongue (Proverbs 6:17). But the righteous used their tongues to praise the Lord (Psalm 51:14).

In figurative language, the tongue is pictured in various ways: a bar [*lashon*: “tongue”] of gold (Joshua 7:21); a tongue of fire (Isaiah 5:24); a bay [*lashon*: “tongue”] along the seashore (Joshua 15:5; Isaiah 11:15).¹

2. The use of the noun *glōssa* in the New Testament:

γλῶσσα. In James 1:26 (“If any one thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his *tongue* but deceives his heart, this man’s religion is vain”²), the need to rule over the tongue appears to be the fundamental ethical task.

The tongue appears even more threatening in the discourse in James 3:2–12, which is shaped by Jewish Wisdom literature and Greek diatribe.

The introductory verse (“If any one makes no mistakes in what he says he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body also” [James 3:2b]) indicates the theme: the central danger of mankind proceeds from the tongue.

¹ Warren Baker and Eugene Carpenter, “לִשׁוֹן,” in *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 2003), 556.

² Expanded translation: “But the one who looks with an earnest desire to absorb in detail the perfect law of freedom, and continues to live in close proximity to it, not having become a forgetful hearer only, but a doer, this man shall acquire unalloyed happiness by the production of divine good.”



Despite the limited size, the tongue has extraordinary power (vv. 3–5a); its devastating power is not only to be compared to that of fire—it is itself a disastrous fire (vv. 5b, 6a ... which, as long as it leads an untamed life of its own, draws the body, i.e., the whole person further into a worldly snare as it corrupts the person (v. 6c; cf. 1:27).³

James will use the word **γλῶσσα** four times in chapter 3: **(1)** in verses 5, “the tongue is a small part of the body,” **(2)** in verse 6, “the tongue is a fire” and “the tongue is set among its members as that which defiles the whole body,” and **(3)** in verse 8, “no one can tame the tongue.” (NASB)

The reason this small member of the body is going to be the subject of an entire chapter is because of the destruction it causes. Generally speaking, you never know who a person really is if he never says anything. What he truly believes is retained inside his stream of consciousness.

Overt behavior and habits are physical and often give some insight, but Solomon informs us in Proverbs 23:7, “as he thinks within himself, so he is.” The tongue is the physical means by which a person reveals his inner thoughts.

The inventory of a person’s soul is in constant flux, progressing either positively or negatively. There are categories of information that define who a person really is and may be summed up briefly by the presence or absence of honor, integrity, loyalty, rectitude, and probity.

If these attributes are well-developed, then the individual is positive to the foundational standards of his culture. However, cultures are varied. What is honorable in one nation would not be so in another.

Therefore, a culture can be honorable or dishonorable. What distinguishes the honorable from the dishonorable is orientation and adjustment to biblical guidance. When standards are based on divine guidance, then a culture will provide maximum liberty to its citizens.

In our constitutional republic, each citizen is free to use his Law of Liberty to make whatever choice he desires as long as he submits to principles of establishment viewpoint.

The choices available are numerous and varied and each individual may freely pursue one or many of them. Among these is the provision by the Law of Liberty that, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

³ Gerhard Dautzenberg, “γλῶσσα,” in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, eds. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 1:252.

The Law of Liberty permits every individual to freely exercise his “religion” of choice, or not. Among those that may be selected is Christianity.

No one is born a Christian. Every person enters this world as a heathen, goy, infidel, barbarian, or in general, an unbeliever. However, under the Law of Liberty, each is free to subscribe to a “religion,” or not.

The difference between Christianity and religions is that the former is based on truth, **ἀλήθεια** (*alētheia*), divine revelation, as opposed to human viewpoint which is the foundation of all religions.

Groups that assume the title of Christian are often functioning as a religion, some subtle, others overt. Many who follow denominational teachings have a flawed foundation since they promote the acquisition of salvation through a system of human works.

Those who follow extra-biblical teachings, include the Mormons’ Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This “religion” is involved in heresy, elevating its “scriptures,” concocted by Joseph Smith in the mid-twentieth century, as superior to biblical revelation. They include *The Book of Mormon*, *Pearl of Great Price*, and *Doctrines and Covenants*.

To distinguish between biblical Christianity and deviations from it, requires serious study of the Word of God. Application of biblical standards is dependent upon each individual’s willingness to reference doctrine learned as the working object for application to life and circumstances. Otherwise, absent an inventory of doctrinal truth, forces believers to use human viewpoint instead of divine guidance.

Therefore, the undergirding support, the immutable power, and the unadulterated veracity of Scripture is the only resource a person may consult for absolute truth and only the spirit-filled believer has access to it.

When this perfectly recorded resource is ignored, then mankind is left to flounder with human rationales offered by *cosmos diabolicus* in a futile search for what this world does not have and thus cannot offer. Scripture is the only repository of truth and only those motivated to study it can acquire it.

Believers are incapable of learning and applying the Bible’s repository of truth without serious study of its teachings. Failure to advance or failure to apply truth to life and circumstances results in the consistent indulgence in personal sin and the performance of human good and evil.

James addresses one of the obvious expressions of this deficiency by his diatribe against verbal sin. The tongue is the resource that transfers carnal attitudes of the soul into verbal expressions. This small part of the body is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.

The Antidote for Verbal Sin

John 8:31 So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed in Him, “If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine;

v. 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

This passage is a key to understanding James 3. What James addresses is the breakdown within the souls of those who attend his church in Jerusalem. Out of fellowship, sins of the tongue lash out at one another with scathing vitriol that destroys the environment for learning.

Until this monster is brought under control, truth will never gain access to the souls of the parishioners. As a result, they can never truly be disciples of the Lord.

Jesus begins verse 3:1 by addressing believers. He gives instructions on how they may successfully advance as His disciples. It begins with an “if” clause of a third-class condition, **ἐάν (eán)**: uncertainty of fulfillment but still likely.

What is uncertain, but still likely, is that these believers will “continue in My Word,” the aorist active subjunctive of **μένω (ménō)**. Some of those gathered will continue in studying His Word, but some will not.

The verb, *ménō* means, “to abide, to persist, remain.” It contains the idea of staying with the obligation to grow in grace regardless of the circumstances.

The aorist tense of *ménō* refers to spiritual growth occurring during one’s physical life. The active voice emphasizes the volitional requirement to stay the course without prolonged deviation from the spiritual walk. However, the subjunctive mood indicates some of those being addressed will not stay the course.

That in which they are being challenged to persist is, “in My Word”: **ἐν τῷ λόγῳ (en tō lógos)**. Those who consistently persist in growing in grace by studying His Word will produce the following objective: “you are truly My disciples.”

The word “truly” is the adverb **ἀληθῶς (alēthōs)**. Some may claim to be disciples of the Lord, but those who “continue in My Word” are certainly disciples of Mine.

The noun “disciples” in the Greek is, μαθητής (mathētēs): One who is constantly associated with someone who has a pedagogical reputation or a particular set of views, disciple, adherent.⁴

⁴ Walter Bauer, “μαθητής,” in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3ed., rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 609.