

What sort of teachers?

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[0 : 0 0] Please do sit down, and I know that you're already super prepared for James chapter 3, page 1012. I'm going to read the whole chapter. We're going to be studying the last 13 verses, from verse 13 to 18, a little later on.

Verse 13.

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It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.

[1 : 5 2] Does a spring pour forth from the same opening, both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct, let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, don't boast and be false to the truth.

This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. Amen. This is the word of the Lord.

[3 : 0 9] Let's pray for a moment as we come to God's word. Lord, cleanse my sins. My soul renew.

And make your word my guide to heaven. Father, we pray that with earnest hearts this evening, you'd wash us clean and guide us by your word.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. There is something in us human beings that just loves a challenge. Are you the sort of person who loves a challenge?

Swim the channel. Climb Mount Everest. Run the first four-minute mile. If it's there to be done, someone will do it. It's just human to love a challenge.

Sometimes that love for a challenge can be exploited. Wind your mind back, if you can, to primary school. I know for some of us that's a long way back.

[4 : 0 8] But if you can, wind your mind back. How many of you experienced a teacher who did this sort of thing? Now, I wonder if there's anyone here who could tell me the answer to this very difficult question.

Now, I don't know what your classroom was like, but in our classroom, faced with that kind of question, everybody around the room is quivering with excitement to hear the question so they can get their hands up. Because everybody is desperate to look clever.

The people who received this letter seem to be the kind of people who just love a challenge, especially when they might have a chance to look clever.

And like a master teacher, James asks the question, verse 13. Who is wise and understanding among you? And instantly one anticipates that all the hands are up around the room.

Sir, sir. That's what it was like in my classroom anyway. Sir, sir. Desperate. Desperate to be asked. Full of small boys who just long to look cleverer than all the others.

[5 : 18] However, some challenges have a sting in the tail. Ah, says the teacher, you can show me how wise you are.

Yes, yes, the hearers say, we can. And then everything takes an unexpected turn. Now, we'll come back to that in a moment. I've dramatized that question, but of course this is a letter, not a classroom situation.

But I think that is precisely the kind of method being used here by James in this letter. Welcome to James chapter 3. Welcome back, some of you. We spent some time in this letter in the autumn.

And just in case you weren't with us then or have forgotten, let me remind you what kind of letter this is. James' letter is not, as it first appears, a rather random collection of instructions for practical Christian living.

Rather, it is a carefully put together corrective letter written to a group of Christians who seem to be behaving very badly to one another.

[6 : 22] Bad behavior is shot all the way through this letter. And bit by bit, James has pulled back the covers off this behavior to see what lies beneath this unpleasant but all too common reality that Christians do not always treat one another in the way that God has treated them.

Within the bad behavior, speech has been a particular problem. We met it first in chapter 1. Just look back to chapter 1, would you? 1.19. Know this, my beloved brothers.

Let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires.

And everything about this letter suggests that James' hearers are not those who are quick to listen. And they're all too quick to speak, and they're often getting angry with one another.

By chapter 3, the covers have been pulled off this problem significantly. Why are these people behaving so badly to one another? Well, in chapter 3, James shines his spotlight not just on their speech, but on their teachers.

[7 : 48] Chapter 3 is full of stuff about speaking, but its main topic is the teacher. Chapter 3, verse 1. Not many of you should become teachers.

In the first half of the chapter, he explains why. But look at the last verse of the chapter as well, verse 18. A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Anyone who knows Jesus' parable of the sower recognizes that the Bible uses the language of sowing and harvesting in connection with teaching.

So, from beginning to end, this chapter has the teacher significantly in view. And the two halves of the chapter do complementary things.

Part 1, don't many of you become teachers now? Part 2, well, what sort of teachers ought we to have then? And that's the question we're asking this evening.

[8 : 49] Verse 13. What sort of teachers? What sort of teachers did James' hearers need? And what sort of teachers do we need? It's a very important question.

And it's important not just for those who are obviously in positions of church leadership, but for every Christian. You see, at one level or another, we all have a function of teaching with one another.

You may not get paid to do it. And you may not do it to huge groups of people all the time. But the job of passing on truth from one to another is not just the pastor's job.

There are all kinds of teaching roles in our churches. And we all have opportunity of using our own words truthfully and lovingly for the good of others.

So the issues here are not far from any one of us. We all use words. Back to the classroom dramatization.

[9 : 51] Who is wise and understanding among you? Says the teacher. The hands go up. Well, let him prove it.

And bearing in mind what we find in this letter, you can imagine James' hearers responding to this question in all too predictable sorts of ways.

Who is wise? Can you prove it? Everybody's thinking how they can prove it. Clever Clarence. Clever Clarence is polishing up his facts.

He has to be the cleverest boy in class. Wordy Walter. He's running through his eloquence exercises. If there's anyone with the gift of the gab, he has it.

He's confident that he can be the wise one. And there's brilliant Bruce. He's trying to remember which of his past speaking engagements he could mention as proof of his wisdom.

[10 : 46] And then there's subtle Sarah who's thinking of that devastating remark she might drop into conversation to upstage all the boys and prove herself to be the cleverest, the wisest.

Can I point that any resemblance to names you may know is entirely accidental? Who is wise among you, says James?

They're already, their hands are up. They can't wait to be chosen. And who does James choose? Well, blow me down if it's not Jillian the good and Martin the meek.

Verse 13. Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct. Let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.

Those are the kinds of teachers that James wants. Those whose lives are marked by goodness and humility.

[11 : 45] Meekness. And I'm quite sure that had this been a classroom discussion, there would no longer be any hands in the air. For goodness and meekness are not what James's readers aspire to.

These are not qualities they had in mind in the how to look wise in front of everyone challenge. The hands are all down now. No one wants to engage in that kind of proof.

But that clever question and answer, the trap has already been sprung. And what James does in the verses that follow is twofold.

First, he unpacks the wisdom that they have. The wisdom that they do aspire to. And next, he describes the wisdom that they really need.

The wisdom that they have is described in verses 14 to 16. The wisdom that they need is described in verses 17 to 18. So let's look at the first first.

[12 : 50] The wisdom they have. Verse 14. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.

This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

What is it that makes these people so keen to be teachers? Well, it's mentioned twice. Two words. Do you see them? Verse 14. Verse 16.

Verse 14. Bitter jealousy. Selfish ambition. Verse 16. Jealousy. Selfish ambition. This is why these people are slow to listen.

Quick to speak. Quick to anger. This is why some of them are so keen to be teachers, because they're ambitious. They're jealous. They want to be recognized. They want to be recognized more than other people.

[13 : 59] Now, you might well say, look, that all sounds a bit extreme. Can that really be a motivation amongst teachers in church? Well, of course it can.

The world we live in just loves a clever speaker. All the way from prime minister's questions at the serious end to stand-up comedy at the trivial end.

We just love it when somebody comes out with smart words, a snappy answer, elegant language, a devastating demolition of somebody else.

And let me say that the church culture we live in tends to love all the same things. Dressed up in spiritual clothes, of course. We love the erudite, the accomplished, the learned, the high-sounding.

We love a good speaker. And sometimes for all the wrong reasons, makes us feel good to be associated with impressive-looking people.

[15 : 03] In a world that loves impressive speech, the church loves her impressive speakers. Who do we value most in church?

Well, as often as not, it's those who are brilliant with words. And we find it much more difficult to value those who are not. And so, in church, many long to be teachers.

And guard their position with jealous ambition, feeling threatened by others, reluctant to promote others, upset that they were not chosen to do this or that. Why did I not get that invitation?

Why was that person chosen to speak at that event? Why did they get asked to speak at the youth group weekend or lead the Bible study or whatever it is? That is the sort of wisdom that James' hearers have.

Where does it come from, this wisdom that you have, says James? Verse 15. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above.

[16 : 05] It's earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. Says James, you can be absolutely sure that when people are like this, quick to speak, won't listen, often angry, eager to be recognized for their teaching ability, threatened by the gifts of others, This is not something that comes down from heaven.

Of course, the words spoken may be spiritual-sounding words, but it's not from heaven, says James. In fact, it's from everywhere but. It's earthly, unspiritual, demonic.

Much of what masquerades as spiritual talk is not. And of course, words are so easy to come by. It's such an accessible cloak for ambition, speech.

If you can breathe and think and move your mouth, you have at your disposal an inexhaustible supply of self-promoting material, your own words.

And if you have the role of being a teacher, you have a public platform for your own words. And if you're good at it, you can dress up your ambition in beautiful-looking clothes, in spiritual-sounding language designed to make you look better than others.

[17 : 31] Where does that come from? Well, not from heaven, says James. What does it do? What's the result of it? Well, verse 16.

Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. And here we are coming very close to the heart of this letter.

What is the cause of this bad behavior that James is talking about in the letter? Answer, verse 16, the jealousy and ambition of those who love to have a voice.

It says, James, show me a church full of disorder and vile behavior, and I'll show you a church where somewhere, somebody just has to be more important than everyone else.

That's why things are the way they are. See what a clever question verse 13 was? Who is wise and understanding among you?

[18 : 37] Oh, you'll have goodness and meekness then. Oh, you don't. Well, what do you have? Well, what you really do have is ambition and jealousy dressed up in spiritual clothes.

The wisdom that you have, it doesn't come from heaven. And that's why you have disorder and every vile practice. It's a devastating diagnosis in just a few sentences. However, thankfully, James does not leave it there because the chapter ends on a much more positive note.

He moves from the wisdom they have, verses 14 to 16, to the wisdom that they need, the wisdom from above. He describes it in verse 13 as goodness and meekness or humility.

Let me read how he unpacks this in verse 17. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. He describes what it's like.

[19 : 57] And again, he describes verse 18, what it does. Now, I think it's fair to say that goodness and meekness or humility are not things that are all that eagerly sought after in this world.

The pursuit of goodness and humility is not what gets people out of bed in the morning. I don't think those things have ever been mainstream desires in any age, do you?

Here's something, somebody writing about the first century world. There was some place for humility in Hebrew thought, but the dominant morality of the day associated the word with weakness and groveling.

The word is linked with adjectives like ignoble, abject, servile, slavish, downcast and low.

Epictetus names humility as first in a list of moral faults. And no doubt many through the ages would agree with him.

[21 : 10] Humility is not top of the list in most people's I must have this before I die. What does it look like, verse 17, this wisdom from above?

Well, it's first of all, pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

Isn't there something very attractive about that collection of words? What is there not to like about that? Pure, unmixed, peaceable.

What a contrast with verse 16, which is so full of self-assertiveness. The wisdom from above is peaceable. It's gentle, not harsh or unkind.

This letter is shot through with harshness and unkindness. It's open to reason. That is to say, it's compliant, willing to give ground, not stubborn and always insisting on its own way.

[22 : 26] Full of mercy, quick to be generous in forgiving, not always squabbling over trifles. Good fruits, impartial.

The word impartial here is interesting. It's without doubleness. And those of you who've been with us in James will know that the dividedness of being that's demonstrated in their behavior, it's very much the heart of its concerns.

The wisdom that comes down from above is without doubleness. It treats people the same. And it's sincere. It's not faking.

It's not putting on an act. It's not pretending to be something. It's a wonderful collection of words, that, isn't it? Beautiful characteristics.

That, says James, that's the wisdom from above. That's how to recognize the God-given wisdom. It might not be flamboyant, but it's certainly remarkable.

[23 : 27] And those are the qualities you need to aspire to personally.

And look at what it will do, verse 18. These qualities in your teachers will produce a harvest of righteousness, peaceable behavior, the kind of behavior that James is wanting his people to show.

Well, it's a short passage. And we've come to the end of it. Let me conclude. What sorts of teachers do we need? And what sorts of characteristics will we value and perceive for ourselves?

For this is everyone's business. What will we look for? Who will we look for to take on positions of responsibility in church or in our Christian union or wherever?

It is so easy to think that what we really need is more of clever Clarence or wordy Walter or brilliant Bruce or subtle Sarah.

[24 : 54] We need more of the impressive people around here. Those are the guys who will get the work done. And we forget that one of the reasons we notice brilliant Bruce is that he's boastful Bruce.

And one of the reasons we notice subtle Sarah is that she's self-promoting Sarah. Brothers and sisters, the first thing we need is not brilliance.

What we do need across the board in any position of responsibility and indeed in every part of our own lives is humble goodness.

That is what God values. That, verse 18, is what God uses. And we know that because we follow a Lord who demonstrated himself precisely those qualities.

You could not look at the life of the Lord Jesus Christ and describe him as an insecure person desperate to leave his mark on the world.

[26 : 05] You could not describe him as a self-promoter. You couldn't describe him as one who stood on his own rights, who had to have the last word in every conversation, who always needed to be talking in order to be comfortable.

You could not describe him as one who spoke against others in order to profit himself. You could not describe him as one who used his words for himself at all.

He is the ultimate in wisdom. And he is our only hope. And his way of doing things is the pattern we need to aspire to.

And the wonderful encouragement of this passage is that it is not, first of all, brilliance that God uses to produce a harvest of righteousness.

It's humble goodness. So do not waste your energy and time in self-promotion, trying to leave your mark on this world or on this church or on your Christian union.

[27 : 22] Do not squander the good gifts that God has given you for bigging yourself up in your own eyes and the eyes of others. That's not why the good gifts that God has given you have been given to you.

All that that will produce, verse 15, 16, is disorder and every vile practice. Bad behavior all over the place.

Instead, says James, aspire to goodness done with humility. That's where the return lies.

That's the route to a great harvest in the end. And, wonderfully, with God's help, that is within the reach of every one of his children, from the most brilliant to the least.

Let's pray together. Who is wise and understanding among you?

[28 : 27] By his good conduct, let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Just a moment to respond in the quiet to what God has said to us. And then I'll lead us in prayer. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. we pray that you'd forgive us for using the good gifts that you've given us for self-promotion. And not least, the wonderful gift of being able to speak and communicate.

Please turn us away from this. Please help us to use this marvelous ability for building up others and for bringing honor to you.

[29 : 58] Pray that you deliver us from bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. You know and we know that these things are close to the surface in our lives. Please have mercy on us and deliver us from them.

We thank you for the Lord Jesus who in every way demonstrates this purity and peaceableness and gentleness and openness to reason and abundance of mercy.

And we pray that when we might desire to be like him and use the good things you've given us in the pursuit of good conduct, in the meekness of wisdom, we pray that out of this you would bring a harvest of righteousness that would bring honor to your name.

This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.