

Fact Sheet for **“A Stricter Standard”**
James 3:1-12

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We begin with one of the most quoted verses from this book.

¹ Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

Take a moment and formulate in your mind what this verse means.

For a long time I was under the impression that this verse was about having an accurate knowledge of the Bible and theology. If a Bible teacher teaches what is inaccurate about God's Word then this can really create problems for people.

God wants you to be rich.

One unconfessed sin will land you in hell.

It's OK to cuss to make a point.

Girl-watching is only admiring God's creation.

These perceptions of what the Bible teaches are patently inaccurate.

It reminds me of when Jesus spoke with Nicodemus about being born again.

ESV John 3:10 Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"

And think about it. Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin! It also reminds me of this verse.

ESV 2 Timothy 2:15 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.

The difficulty with this understanding of James 3:1 is that it doesn't fit the context of James' thoughts. He doesn't go on to talk about a good understanding of scripture. He doesn't go on to write about having good theology. There is something else in his mind. Instead of writing about knowledge, he wrote about the tongue.

² For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.

This is not about Bible knowledge or theology. It's about the application of God's Word to life, specifically the tongue. From time to time we all stumble in what we say, how we say it, or why we say it. James wrote in a time when many of the new Jewish Christians aspired to teach and by so doing carry some of the rank and admiration given to the Rabbis. There was a problem in their motivation to be a teacher. It came from an attitude of pride. And as they professed to have a clear knowledge of what God desired from others they themselves were not following it, and this showed up in their words. They were boastful and caustic to others.

I've seen people who hold very different positions debate theology well, with sensitivity and humility, yet with firmness. And often they finish the conversations continuing to hold their own

views. I've also seen people slander others, cut them to shreds, and break Christian fellowship, if they didn't agree with them. I immediately wonder why the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) are so easily thrown out the window. Is there an exemption clause on these things if you don't agree with another's theology? Instead what I've seen most closely matches the immediately preceding verses (Galatians 5:19-21). Once as I tried, with courtesy yet with firmness, to show someone who had more seminary education than I did, that he was wrong in how he was applying the Bible. He verbally threatened to punch me! And he taught in the positions he held. In James' day you can almost imagine what was happening from the words he wrote.

³ If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. ⁴ Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵ So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!

You know that what several of these teachers said wrongly bit and stung others.

⁶ And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. ⁷ For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, ⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰ From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. ¹⁰ My brothers, these things ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? ^{12a} Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs?

A similar saying from the Sermon on the Mount:

ESV Matthew 7:16 You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?

A similar saying from the Sermon on the Plain:

ESV Luke 6:44b For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush.

^{12b} Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

Again from verse 10... **“these things ought not to be so.”**

So we come back to verse 1.

¹ Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

The issue was not knowledge, it was application. James wrote to some who had a problem with their tongue, but there is a greater principle here. Those who aspire to be teachers, who profess to have a clear knowledge of their duty before God, are all the more bound to obey it.

We as teachers will be judged by a stricter standard for how we live. This passage in James lets you know where God puts the emphasis... on the application of truth to life.