

# Homiletics Analysis: James 3

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## Content & Intent

### This Text — Content

James 3 divides into two movements that are more unified than they first appear. The first movement (vv. 1–12) addresses the tongue — its power, its danger, its contradiction, and its theological root. James opens with a warning to would-be teachers, then escalates into a sustained meditation on the unbridled tongue as the most dangerous and self-contradictory organ of the human body. He piles up analogies (bit, rudder, spark, wild animals, spring, fig tree) to establish a single devastating claim: the tongue is a world of evil, set on fire by hell itself, and no human being can tame it. The climax is the contradiction in verse 10 — blessing and cursing from the same mouth — which James calls simply wrong: “This should not be.” The second movement (vv. 13–18) shifts from speech to wisdom, contrasting two kinds of wisdom: earthly wisdom, which is demonic and produces envy, selfish ambition, disorder, and every evil practice; and heavenly wisdom, which is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits. The two movements are linked by the theme of the “double nature” — the tongue’s contradiction mirrors wisdom’s contradiction. What comes out of the mouth reveals what wisdom governs the heart.

### This Text — Intent

God is seeking to confront His people with a diagnostic truth: the tongue is not merely a behavioral problem to be managed — it is a spiritual and theological problem exposing the governing wisdom of the heart. The intent is not behavior modification regarding speech but deep conviction about the source of words — that earthly wisdom produces deathly speech, while heavenly wisdom produces life-giving, peaceable, righteous speech. James wants his readers to stop treating the tongue as a peripheral concern, and to start treating it as the exact instrument that reveals whether they are living from below or from above. The effect God is seeking is not “try harder to control your words” but “examine what wisdom is actually governing you — and repent of the earthly kind, seeking the heavenly.”

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**Subject Sentence:** The unbridled tongue exposes the heart’s governing wisdom — from below or from above.

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**Primary Claim:** God is confronting His people with the diagnostic truth that words do not merely *reflect* character — they *reveal* which wisdom governs the heart, and He is calling

every reader to submit to the heavenly wisdom that alone produces the peaceable fruit of righteousness.

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## Interpretive Evaluation

### The “Teacher” Warning (v. 1) — Scope and Application

Some interpreters restrict verse 1 narrowly to professional clergy or ordained teaching office, applying the “stricter judgment” warning only to those in formal ecclesiastical roles. This under-reads the text. James is writing to dispersed Jewish believers in a synagogue-style assembly context where teachers exercised significant informal and formal authority — the warning is about anyone who presumes to speak with instructional authority over others, whether formally credentialed or not. The stricter judgment is not about ordination but about the power asymmetry of teaching: those who shape others’ understanding of God’s Word bear proportionally greater accountability for the words they speak in that role. The Reformed reading appropriately applies this verse to all who exercise any teaching function while recognizing it has particular weight for those in recognized teaching offices.

### The Tongue’s “Untameability” (vv. 7–8) — Absolute or Emphatic?

A significant interpretive question is whether James is making an absolute claim (no one can ever tame the tongue) or an emphatic claim (no human being, in his own strength, can tame it). Wesleyan/Arminian and Holiness traditions have sometimes read this verse as describing the pre-sanctified condition, implying that entire sanctification or Spirit-filling resolves the problem. This reading is difficult to sustain. James is writing to believers — “my brothers” (v. 10) — not to the unregenerate. His argument is not “unsaved people struggle with the tongue” but “you, my Christian brothers, are producing contradiction from the same mouth.” The point is not that the Spirit cannot accomplish transformation but that no *human effort or discipline alone* can tame the tongue — the root problem is deeper than behavioral management. The Reformed reading takes James seriously: the tongue’s corruption is not fully resolved this side of glorification, which is why the call is to wisdom (vv. 13–18), not technique. However, this does not mean sanctification produces no change in speech — James elsewhere assumes obedience is possible — it means the tongue remains the last, hardest frontier of sanctification, requiring ongoing divine grace.

### Earthly Wisdom as “Demonic” (v. 15) — The Strength of the Language

Some commentators soften “demonic” (*daimoniōdēs*) to mean merely “foolish” or “worldly” to avoid the jarring implication that ordinary competitive, self-promoting wisdom participates in something satanic. This softening must be resisted. James is making a deliberately strong claim: earthly wisdom — characterized by bitter jealousy and selfish ambition — does not merely fail to reach the divine standard; it originates from a diametrically opposed source. The contrast is not between God’s wisdom and human wisdom but between God’s wisdom and *hell’s* wisdom. This strengthens the diagnostic

function of the passage: when a congregation is marked by envy, factionalism, and competitive ambition, James is saying they are not merely being unwise — they are being governed by a wisdom that is satanic in its ultimate source. The Reformed reading takes this language at face value and sees in it a call to radical self-examination, not merely self-improvement.

### The Two Wisdoms and Justification by Works

Some readers draw a Pauline contrast between James 3:13–18 and Paul’s teaching on justification, noting that James grounds wisdom in conduct: “show by your good life that your works are done in the wisdom of God” (v. 13). This is not a contradiction of Paul — it is an application of the same grammar. Paul distinguishes the ground of justification (faith alone, not works) from the evidence of justification (faith that works). James is addressing the same reality from the applicational side: a claim to heavenly wisdom without peaceable, merciful, good-fruited conduct is as empty as a claim to faith without works. The Reformed tradition — particularly as expressed by Calvin and the Westminster Standards — holds both together: justification is by faith alone, but the faith that justifies is never alone. James 3:13–18 is exhibit A of what saving faith’s wisdom looks like when it reaches the tongue and the community.

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## Key Canonical Support

- **Proverbs 18:21** — “*Death and life are in the power of the tongue.*” The wisdom literature’s foundational statement on the tongue’s power directly grounds James’s analogies; James is applying Proverbs’ consistent teaching into the New Covenant assembly.
- **Psalms 34:12–14** — “*Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit... seek peace and pursue it.*” The Psalter connects speech, peace, and the fear of the LORD — the same triad James assembles in chapter 3.
- **Matthew 12:33–37** — “*Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks... by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.*” Jesus establishes the theological root James assumes: words are not incidental but diagnostic of the heart’s governing allegiance.
- **Proverbs 8 / James 1:5** — The personification of heavenly Wisdom in Proverbs 8 as God’s ordering principle stands behind James’s contrast in 3:13–18; James has already told his readers to ask God for this wisdom (1:5), and chapter 3 shows what it looks like when received and what it looks like when absent.
- **Romans 3:13–14** — Paul’s catena of Old Testament texts describing the unregenerate condition centers on the throat, tongue, lips, and mouth — establishing that the tongue problem James addresses is not peripheral to

anthropology but central to the human condition under sin, with redemption required from the outside.

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**Aim:** To drive readers to examine what wisdom is actually governing their speech and their community life, and to seek the heavenly wisdom that produces peaceable, merciful, righteous fruit — not by behavioral effort but by humble submission to God.

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## Content Table

| Verse(s) | Content                                                                                   | Notes                                                                                                       |
|----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 3:1      | Warning to would-be teachers — stricter judgment awaits them                              | “My brothers” signals this is to believers; the warning is proportional to influence                        |
| 3:2      | Universal acknowledgment of stumbling — the tongue as the hardest test of maturity        | “Perfect” ( <i>teleios</i> ) means mature/complete, not sinless; the tongue is the apex measure             |
| 3:3–4    | First two analogies: the bit in the horse’s mouth; the rudder of a large ship             | Small controls commanding great forces — the tongue exercises disproportionate power                        |
| 3:5a     | The tongue boasts of great things — the connection between small size and outsized claim  | Pride and power are compounded in the tongue                                                                |
| 3:5b–6   | Third analogy: a small fire setting a great forest ablaze; the tongue as a fire           | The tongue is “a world of evil” — hell-sourced, defiling the whole body, setting the course of life on fire |
| 3:7–8    | All kinds of creatures have been tamed, but no human can tame the tongue                  | The tongue is a restless evil, full of deadly poison — the untameability is the human predicament           |
| 3:9–10   | The contradiction: blessing God and cursing those made in God’s image from the same mouth | “This should not be” — the contradiction is theologically intolerable, not merely socially awkward          |
| 3:11–12  | Three natural analogies of consistency: spring, fig tree,                                 | Nature is consistent; the human tongue is perversely                                                        |

| Verse(s) | Content                                                                                                        | Notes                                                                                                      |
|----------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|          | grapevine                                                                                                      | inconsistent — what should this tell us?                                                                   |
| 3:13     | Call to wisdom: who is wise?<br>Let him show it by conduct<br>— works done in wisdom's meekness                | The pivot: from speech diagnosis to wisdom examination                                                     |
| 3:14–16  | Earthly wisdom described: bitter jealousy, selfish ambition, boasting — this is demonic                        | The catalog of community disorder traces back to a demonic wisdom, not merely human weakness               |
| 3:17     | Heavenly wisdom described: pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, merciful, good-fruited, impartial, sincere | Eight characteristics — purity leads the list; peace pervades the rest                                     |
| 3:18     | A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace                                            | The peacemakers produce the fruit — the community of heavenly wisdom is marked by righteousness from peace |

## Divisions Table

| Division | Verses  | Label                                                              |
|----------|---------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1        | 3:1–2   | The Weight of Words: Teachers Face Stricter Judgment               |
| 2        | 3:3–6   | The Power of the Tongue: Small, Boastful, and Devastating          |
| 3        | 3:7–8   | The Predicament: No Human Can Tame It                              |
| 4        | 3:9–12  | The Contradiction: Blessing and Cursing from One Mouth             |
| 5        | 3:13–16 | Earthly Wisdom Diagnosed: Demonic in Source, Destructive in Effect |
| 6        | 3:17–18 | Heavenly Wisdom                                                    |

| Division | Verses | Label                                         |
|----------|--------|-----------------------------------------------|
|          |        | Described: Pure, Peaceable, and Fruit-Bearing |

## Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

**Subject Sentence:** The unbridled tongue exposes the heart’s governing wisdom — from below or from above.

**Primary Claim:** God is confronting His people with the diagnostic truth that words do not merely *reflect* character — they *reveal* which wisdom governs the heart, and He is calling every reader to submit to the heavenly wisdom that alone produces the peaceable fruit of righteousness.

## Applications (Five)

### 1. Examine your speech as a diagnostic, not a discipline problem. (*Mind/belief*)

James does not say “try harder with your words” — he says your words tell you something about your heart. The next time you catch yourself speaking harshly, sarcastically, critically, or boastfully, do not move immediately to resolve to do better. Stop and ask the prior question: what wisdom is governing me right now? If your words are bitter, competitive, or contemptuous, James says you are not merely having a bad day — you are living from a demonic wisdom. The tongue is the diagnostic instrument, not the primary patient. Begin there.

### 2. Receive the doctrine of the untameable tongue as liberating, not defeating. (*Affections/worship*)

It should produce a kind of relief, not despair, to hear that no human being can tame the tongue — because it means the solution is not located in you. You are not failing at a project you should be able to complete. You are dependent on a wisdom that comes down from above, from the Father of lights, who gives generously to all who ask (1:5, 17). The proper response to James 3:7–8 is not renewed self-discipline — it is renewed prayer and renewed dependence. Worship the God who gives what we cannot manufacture.

### 3. Refuse to tolerate the contradiction of blessing God and cursing image-bearers. (*Will/behavior*)

James says this “should not be” — and the Greek construction conveys not merely that it is unfortunate but that it is theologically wrong, a violation of the created order. Take inventory of your relational speech. Is there a person — a colleague, a family member, a political opponent, a difficult neighbor — toward whom your speech is contemptuous, dismissive, or habitually negative? That person bears the image of God. Blessing God in

worship while cursing that image-bearer in conversation is not Christianity with rough edges — it is a fundamental contradiction James refuses to normalize. Name the person. Address the speech.

#### **4. Audit your community for the marks of earthly versus heavenly wisdom.** (*Mind/belief*)

James 3:14–18 provides a two-column diagnostic for any community — family, small group, church, workplace. Earthly wisdom produces: jealousy, rivalry, boasting, disorder, every vile practice. Heavenly wisdom produces: purity, peace, gentleness, openness, mercy, consistency, sincerity. Apply this to the community you inhabit most closely. Which column better describes what you find there? Which column better describes what you *contribute* there? This is not an abstract theological exercise — it is a community health assessment with real-world consequences for how you engage, lead, speak, and serve.

#### **5. Become a deliberate peacemaker, knowing that righteousness grows in peace-sown soil.** (*Will/behavior*)

Verse 18 is easily missed but is the chapter’s culminating vision: “A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.” This is agricultural language — righteousness does not emerge spontaneously; it grows in soil that someone had to prepare. The peacemakers are the ones doing the soil-work. Identify the relational fracture in your closest community — the conflict being managed rather than addressed, the awkwardness being navigated rather than resolved. Commit to being the one who does the soil-work. Not the one who demands peace, but the one who *makes* it, knowing that righteousness grows there.

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## Theological Importance

**Theological Importance:** James 3 establishes that the tongue is not a peripheral concern of practical ethics but a window into the deepest theological reality of the human person — which wisdom governs the heart. James reveals that God takes the contradiction of blessing and cursing with full theological seriousness because it violates the image-of-God dignity of the person being cursed. The passage also establishes that wisdom is not primarily intellectual — it is moral and communal, visible in conduct, character, and community. Most significantly, James’s framing of two wisdoms — one from above, one demonic — grounds the ethics of speech not in self-discipline but in theology proper: what is the source of the wisdom shaping this life? The answer to that question determines everything about how a person speaks and whether their community flourishes or decays.

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## Reformed Theological Significance

**Reformed Theological Significance:** This passage is a powerful exhibit of the Reformed anthropological conviction that the heart is the governing center of the person, and that

external conduct (here, speech) is downstream of internal allegiance. James 3 is not calling for behavioral reformation — it is calling for the kind of heart renewal that only heavenly wisdom, given by God, can produce. The Reformed tradition’s insistence that sanctification is the Spirit’s work, not human effort, is precisely what keeps James 3 from becoming a crushing moralism. The “heavenly wisdom” of verses 13–18 is not a human achievement — it “comes down from above” (compare 1:17), implying its source is divine gift, not human cultivation. Furthermore, the two-wisdoms contrast maps directly onto the Reformed understanding of the antithesis — the fundamental opposition between a life ordered by God’s covenant wisdom and a life ordered by the world, the flesh, and the devil. The community of heavenly wisdom that James envisions in verse 17 is nothing less than the covenant community living out its identity as the new creation people, where God’s ordering wisdom governs even the smallest organ of the body.

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## Main Takeaway

Your words are not just a habit to improve — they are a revelation of which wisdom is running your life. If your speech is marked by bitterness, competition, contempt, or contradiction, James says you are not dealing with a communication problem — you are dealing with a *source* problem. The fix is not a better technique for the tongue; it is humble, persistent asking for the wisdom that comes down from above, the wisdom that is first pure, then peaceable, then full of mercy. Ask for it. Live from it. And watch what grows.

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## Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing the passage to a practical speech-management seminar.** The most common mishandling of James 3 is treating it as a self-improvement lecture on controlling the tongue. Teachers list practical tips for better communication, positive speech habits, and relational kindness — and the passage’s devastating theological diagnosis is entirely lost. James is not offering techniques; he is delivering a verdict. The tongue is untameable by human effort, hell-sourced in its corruption, and diagnostic of the heart. Begin there, or the application will be as shallow as self-help.
- **Preaching verse 1 only to professional ministers.** The warning to teachers is sometimes siloed as “a word for pastors” and treated as irrelevant to the congregation. This misses James’s point: he is calling his whole community to soberly reckon with the weight of words spoken with authority. In a social-media age where everyone is functionally a public teacher with an audience, the warning has never been more broadly applicable. Broaden the application without losing the passage’s particular accountability on those who formally teach.

- **Making the “untameable tongue” (vv. 7–8) an excuse rather than a diagnosis.** Some hearers will receive “no human being can tame the tongue” as permission for ongoing sinful speech: “See — even James says we can’t control it.” This is precisely backwards. James’s point is not that the tongue is excusable but that it is *desperate* — the problem exceeds human self-management and requires divine intervention. The untameability is not a permission slip; it is an indictment that drives the hearer to God.
- **Treating the two wisdoms (vv. 13–18) as disconnected from vv. 1–12.** The second half of the chapter is often preached as an independent passage on wisdom, losing its structural function as the *resolution* to the tongue problem. James is not changing subjects in verse 13 — he is answering the question his diagnosis raised: if no human can tame the tongue, what hope is there? The answer is heavenly wisdom, which produces the peaceable, merciful, consistent speech that the tongue’s corruption makes impossible in the flesh. Preach the chapter as a unity.
- **Missing the community dimension of verses 14–18.** The earthly-wisdom catalog (envy, selfish ambition, disorder) and the heavenly-wisdom catalog (peace, gentleness, mercy) are not primarily individual virtues and vices — they are descriptions of community life. James is diagnosing what happens to a congregation governed by earthly wisdom versus one governed by heavenly wisdom. Teachers who individualize the application too quickly lose the passage’s ecclesiological force: the tongue problem and the wisdom problem are destroying community life, not just personal spiritual health.
- **Softening “demonic” in verse 15.** The temptation is to translate *daimoniōdēs* as “worldly” or “foolish” to avoid the strong language. Resist this. James uses the word deliberately — he wants his readers to understand that the competitive, envious, self-promoting wisdom that drives factionalism in the church is not merely unspiritual: it is actively satanic in its origin and operation. The strength of the language is the pastoral point. A congregation comfortable with envy and selfish ambition needs to hear that they are participating in something demonic, not merely suboptimal.