WISDOM FROM HEAVEN

James 3:1-18 / Key Verse: 3:13

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

So far we have taken four lessons on James chapter 1 and 2. The titles were: *Whenever you face trials, Do what it says, Mercy triumphs over judgement, Faith and action work together.*

In today’s passage, James talks about two interesting topics: 1. our tongues, 2. wisdom from heaven. Our tongues have a great power. They can turn the whole body into a direction; they can also destroy it. Therefore, they must be tamed. However, no one but only Jesus, the wisdom of God, can fill our hearts with heavenly wisdom and can let our tongues speak heavenly things. In this message, let’s learn how our tongues give an impact on our lives and the body of Christ and what heavenly wisdom can do so that we can grow into mature like our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Part I. Untamable flammable tongues (1-12)**

Look at verse 1. ***Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.*** There is a teaching in Jewish Talmud chapter 4. A father asks his son. ‘Son, if your father and your teacher are held as captives and you can only redeem one of the two. Who are you going to save?’ Father teaches. ‘You should redeem your teacher first.’” The Jews valued the teacher more importantly. Even among the Jewish Christians at that time, Bible teachers were highly respected. Because of this, quite many Christians wanted to become teachers. In addition, the scattered Jewish Christians followed the tradition of the synagogue-centered society, and anyone within the church had the right to read and preach the Word. Besides the New Testament was not canonized at the time, false teachings as well as quarrels could easily enter and destroy the churches. In this background, James says: Look at verse 1a. ***1 Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers…*** It means that you should not rush to become a teacher *with wrong motivation*. There might be many reasons to become teachers. In this passage there were someone who were motivated by boasting, envy and selfish ambition. They liked to get attention and praise from others when they teach. James gives some important lessons to them.

First, teachers will be judged more strictly. James says in verse 1b, ***…you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.*** Look at verse 2a. James says, ***we all stumble in many ways.*** The teacher is gracious and glorious not because of human recognition and glory, but because through teaching God’s words, the teacher, as an instrument of God, comes to know Jesus Christ more deeply. But we should know that behind the blessing lies a heavy responsibility and God's strict judgment. If you teach others well and do not teach yourself, that is, if you do not follow what you taught, you will become a hypocrite like the religious leaders in the Bible. Teachers who do not repent and do not obey the word can fall into temptation as he/she is caught by the trap of human recognition and glory and Satan's trap. Also, if wrong teaching makes your brothers or sisters stumble, the responsibility for the teaching is as heavy as life. So James says, including himself we all stumble in many ways. Therefore, James says that the teacher does not simply teach, but must constantly repent and obey the word before God.

God calls us His children by the blood of Jesus Christ. And Jesus has called us to be his disciples. We, as children of God, disciples of Jesus, have a great privilege and blessing in his eyes. At the same time we have a great responsibility. If we do live according to envy and selfish ambition like others in the world and if they see our hypocrisy, hatred, and injustice, they will become further away from God through our selfish and hypocritical life. I pray that we, as disciples of Jesus and children of God, may not stumble, but bear the grace of His calling and salvation

Second, our tongues have a profound influence. Look at verse 2b. ***if anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.*** When James says that we all stumble - it means that we sin. We sin in many ways, but here James is dealing specifically with our tongue. He uses the present tense which implies that we never stop sinning it with our tongues. However if we control our tongue, then we can control our whole body because our tongue is the hardest thing to control. James says that we all should learn to control our tongues, grow mature and learn to control our whole body.

In verses 3-12, James teaches us about the nature of the tongue with many illustrations. Look at verse 3. ***3 When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal.*** Horse trainers put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey their masters. If you don’t have control of the horse, you go wherever the horse goes. And sometimes it’s not where you want to go. The same is true for your tongue, if you don’t have control of it, it will lead you where you don’t want to go.

***4 Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go.*** The next example is the rudder of a ship. Gerald R Ford Class warship is known as the world’s biggest aircraft carrier. It displaces about 100,000 tons as much as 400 statues of Liberty, 337m long, 2 nuclear reactors powered, they hold about 5,000 personnel and 75 aircrafts and that massive vessel is piloted by the captain, essentially by the rudders. The bit and the rudder have the power to direct which means that they affect the lives of people. The tongue, although it is small, it has power to control the whole body. Once it is controlled, the whole body can be controlled. As we are children of God, our speech should be in control. We shouldn’t take part in rude jokes, or vulgar speech because it doesn’t match who we are and it doesn’t project the glory of God to others.

Look at verse 5a. ***Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.*** The tongue is small, but our tongues tend to make great boasts whenever it gets a chance. And these boasts can unintentionally turn a person’s life in a direction they never intended. Take for example King Herod. One time at his birthday party his daughter danced for the crowd. He was so pleased and boasted in front of the crowd, “Ask for anything you want and I will give it to you, up to half my kingdom.” But when she asked for John the Baptist’s head on a platter, he was greatly distressed. But because he made such a boast in front of the crowd, reluctantly he fulfilled her request. The Bible encourages us not to boast.

Look at verses 5b-6. ***Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.*** The tongue has power to destroy. It is like a small spark that starts a huge fire. Many forest fires all start from a small spark. The tongue is a fire. We are the body of Christ. We are all connected to one another because Jesus Christ is the head of our church body. What we say affects each other. The tongue can start a whole church on fire. And it takes so much effort to put it out. Jesus said it’s not what goes into a person that makes them unclean, but rather it’s what comes out of their mouth that defiles them.(Mt 15:11) Not only does it defile you but everyone you come in contact with. It corrupts the whole body, that’s why it’s like a fire. “set on fire by hell”. It can be set on fire from the pit of hell. The tongue flatters, curses, boasts, betrays, accuses, speaks deceit, uses devious words, lies, seduces, speaks perversion, it’s spiteful, plots destruction, has the potential for death. Jesus said in Matthew 12:34, “You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.” Jesus again said in Matthew 15:18-19, “But the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts – murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.” The tongue is connected to the heart.

Look at verses 7-8. ***All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*** The tongue is untamable by any human being. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. This even happens to an intimate relationship between husband and wife. Even though no man can tame our tongues, God can. God can tame it when we submit our will to him and when our hearts are filled with God’s word.

As we know, there was a special historical event in the Bible which happened in the day of Pentecost. Around 120 followers with Jesus’ disciples gathered in one place and waited for the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised. They prayed earnestly to God. Then they heard a violent wind-blowing sound and saw an image like tongues of fire coming down to rest on them. All the crowds in the room were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages. This was the first sign that the Holy Spirit enabled them to speak the great wonders of God. Their words have completely changed. No human being but God filled their hearts with the Spirit and tamed their tongues. When our hearts are filled with God, we cannot stop speaking of God.

I grew up hearing harsh words. They were often deadly poisonous and murderous. Those words hurt me a lot, and had a great impact on my personality. My heart was full of hatred and anger. I became violent and merciless. Often I would yell at the village and threw curses at it and the world. I used to think that if I have a supernatural power, I would like to explode the Earth. One day, when I was in grade 6, I became more serious than ever and spitted out cursing words at my teacher. That day, I was beaten terribly by my teacher, and that day, for the first time in my life, I wrote down my confessions, and the next day my teacher forced me to read them all in front of my classmates. I felt crushed and it seemed to be working, but no one could save me. I turned to study which was the only way to pay it back. God has invited me to Bible study when I was 1st year in university. I saw a hope that Jesus would save me and change me. I confessed all my sins before Him, and petitioned his forgiveness. I believed and confessed to Jesus you are my Christ and the Lord. Since then on, I had come to realize that Jesus has changed me from within. My family was very surprised by the change in me. With the blood of Jesus on the cross, the Lord melted my hatred, anger, bitterness, and violence and made them all flow down to tears. He filled my heart with his love, grace, gratitude, and forgiveness. The world looked completely different just like a demon-possessed man in the Gerasenes who cursed the world met the Lord Jesus Christ and was freed from the bondage of sin and Satan and sat by the Lord with a right mind. Oh how peaceful it is I felt! Yes, it is true no one can tame our tongues because we cannot change what we are. We are corrupted! But Jesus can do it. If we confess all the sins we have committed with our mouth and heart before the Lord and repent of it, the Lord forgives us all our sins and purify our hearts and tongues by his precious blood. Fill our hearts with His heart, His Holy Spirit. If we accept Jesus as our Savior and Lord with faith in our hearts, Jesus will rule over us. He also fills us with words from heaven.

In preparing this message, I examined my words. There were many filthy jokes in my speech, both at work and at home. There are many worldly things that I had piled up in my heart. I pray that I may repent of my sins before the Lord and God’s Word may fully occupy my heart and tame my tongue.

Look at verses 9-10 ***9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. 10 Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.*** James says that we praise God and curse men with the same tongue. This is not right. This shouldn’t be a part of our life. We are new creations and have new tongues. We should not curse anyone because they are made in the image of God.

Look at verses 11-12. ***11 Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? 12 My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.*** Everyone knows that salt water and fresh water can’t flow from the same source. We also know what kind of tree it is by what kind of fruit it bears. So if we claim to be children of God and Jesus’ disciples and yet we talk like this, maybe we are not who we claim to be. We are called hypocrites by the world.

**Part II. Wisdom from heaven(13-17)**

Look at verse 13. ***13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.*** Here James asks them a question. Who is wise and understanding? James tells us that if you think you are wise and understanding, prove it with your good life and deeds, the result of wisdom from God. What exactly are these good life and deeds? It is a life that imitates the humility of Jesus. Christ humbled himself from the throne of heaven and became as a man. He submitted to God and obeyed him, even to the point of death. His humility brought sinners to God. His humility came from heavenly wisdom. Therefore the wise and understanding are those who learn Jesus’ humility in order to serve God and others. Humble obedience to God and serving for others in humility are the evidences of the wisdom that comes from God. However there is also a wisdom that is not from above.

Look at verse 14. ***14 But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.*** The wisdom from the world is fueled by bitter envy and selfish ambition. It is not the wisdom from heaven. James says, do not boast about it. If you are proud of it, you are spiritually in danger because you will deny the truth. Therefore, they must repent now and learn the humility of Jesus before it is too late. Bitter envy and selfish ambition are divisive spirits that seek to break any harmonious unity.

Look at verse 15. ***15 Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil.*** This type of “wisdom” is earthly. It is about fame, power, glory and money. This “wisdom” is not from God, and is not of God. Such wisdom is unspiritual. In other translations, this is “sensual,” and it refers to the lust of the flesh, carnal lusts, pleasures. Such wisdom is of the devil. It is influenced and inspired by the devil.

Look at verse 16. ***16 For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.*** Such wisdom is driven by envy for what others have, and by selfish ambition to take it. Such wisdom directs each person to serve him- or herself first, not God and others. Out of envy and selfish ambition there are disorder and every evil practice. The disorder and evil practice are well described in Rom1:29-31. It says, “They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, 30 slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; 31 they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy.” Therefore such wisdom cannot lead people to know God.

Then what is the characteristics of the wisdom from heaven? Look at verse 17. ***17 But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.*** The character of heavenly wisdom is very different than selfish, worldly ambition. James describes heavenly wisdom as "pure". Wisdom from heaven is peace-loving, seeking peace from heaven through forgiveness of our sins and seeking the reconciliation between God and men and then among men through truth and love. This wisdom is considerate, not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but repay evil with blessing and ready to serve. This wisdom is submissive, ready to deny one’s will, but to fulfill God’s will to save lives and to build up the body of Christ. The wisdom is full of mercy and all the good things that flow from living this way. This wisdom is impartial, not showing the favoritism. This wisdom is sincere, with no need to fake anything, but sincere before God and his people. James 1:5, “If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.” I pray that God may grant us pure wisdom from heaven.

The Bible clearly says this wisdom of God is Christ Jesus. God’s wisdom is found in Jesus Christ. Apostle Paul said in Phil 3 about the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus that he wanted to know Christ all the more. Proverbs 4:7 says, Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding. Jesus Christ is the wisdom of God. So when we learn Jesus, we get wisdom from heaven. And his characters naturally radiate through our mouths and our good lives.

***18 Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.*** It is kind of a natural outcome when we are equipped heavenly wisdom. We are peacemakers, reconciling the world to God through the preaching of the gospel. We are peacemakers, loving our neighbors as ourselves. So we sow in peace. To sow means to plant a seed. Even in correcting someone, we do that gently. We sow in peace, and in due time, we will reap a harvest of righteousness.

**In conclusion**, our tongues are powerful. It is small, but it is capable of turning the whole body into a direction and causing a great disaster in one’s life, family, and the body of Christ. Our tongues are untamable; as long as our hearts are occupied with ungodly wisdom from boasting, bitter envy, and selfish ambition. James concludes our hearts must be filled with heavenly wisdom, that is, Jesus Christ, who not only can tame our tongues, but produces humility, and results in our good lives and deeds.