

The letter of St James

A Better Way of Living

Session Five: Answers/Opinions: The Importance of Words.

We were looking at James 3:1-12: Taming the tongue.

1. James issues a warning to teachers and to would be teachers.

The church must have teachers Acts 2:42; *“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”*

But teaching is a gift of the Holy Spirit; I Cor. 12:28 *“....God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets and third teachers,”*

Those with that gift are given to the church; Ephesians 4:11 *“It was He who gave.....some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for the works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up....,”* the “*body of Christ*” of course being the Church.

Paul warned that when appointing church leaders, they must be *“able to teach”*, 1 Timothy 3:1-2. He said this knowing that some who aspired to teach were not so gifted.

But teachers must understand the responsibility that teaching entails. Jesus said, *“From everyone who has been given much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.”* Luke 12:48. And Paul reminded us in 2 Corinthians 5:10, *“For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, that each may receive what is due to him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.”* (Here by “body” he means during our lives). This warning Paul makes is the same one that James makes in verse 1 of our passage.

2. In verses 2-12, James widens his audience to include all believers, because we are all witnesses to Christ and so what we all say matters and we all make mistakes. We all find what we say the most difficult thing to control. If we control our tongue, we are likely to be control of ourselves in all things.

Marion has just lent me Felicity Kendal’s book ‘*White Cargo*’. On page 2 her Father’s advice to her is; *“Always remember, Foo, that your voice is your most precious instrument: the sound you make can move an audience to laugh or cry.”* It seemed too apt not to mention it. What we say can turn someone towards Christ, but just as easily turn them away. Our voices are a most precious instrument.

3. In verses 7&8 James expands on why it is so difficult to control what we say. Despite having been given the right to rule over all creatures by God, Genesis 1:28, we can’t rule our own tongues. The word *“restless”* in verse 8, suggests an untamed animal and in *“deadly poison”* he is thinking of the vipers in Psalm 140:3b, *“the poison of vipers is on their lips.”*

What James wants us to recognise is, that only the power of God can enable someone to control their own tongue; such a person is *“mature and complete”* as in 1:4.

4. I think James uses the idea of *“all kinds of animal”*, so that we do refer back to the creation story in Genesis chapter 1, and to remind ourselves that we were created in God’s own image and so emphasis the responsibilities that entails.

5. Verses 9-12 seem to be warning us of hypocrisy. If we are cursing men, we are not keeping the Royal Law (2:8), and then go on to praise God, is just what Jesus found so wrong with the attitude of some of the leaders in Jerusalem in Matthew chapter 23.
The ideas of the spring water and fruit trees emphasise the importance of the purity of our words: they must reflect kindness and goodness.
Andrew in his talk on 1st July said “The spring of our heart pouring out fresh water; living water and wisdom from above”, which put it beautifully, I thought.
6. Rather than domesticated, “tame” here means, I think, able to be subdued or to be brought under human control.
7. James is a teacher and uses “we” to include himself as both teacher and man. He knows he makes mistakes, says the wrong thing at the wrong time, speaks without thinking, hurts people unintentionally, puts his foot in it, does everything we all do. He might even have the odd whinge now and then. By including himself, he encourages us all to remember that we are not alone in the struggle to take care in what we say.
8. Most of the references I make in answer to the first question are relevant to teaching and mainly apply to speech, although behaviour is important as well.
In Exodus 4:12, God says to Moses, *“I will help you speak and will teach you what to say”*, which supports what we saw in question 3, that only the power of God gives us the right words.
In 1 Samuel 12:23, Samuel tells Saul that he will pray to God, *“And teach you the way that is good and right.”* This reinforces our belief that God relies on those he appoints to teach others.
The psalms are full of references about teaching, but the Pastoral letters give us the most detail on what we should say and how to say it. Read Paul’s encouragement to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:1-16 and 2 Timothy 1:8-12 are full of advice for a teacher. In 2 Tim. 2:14-26, he also emphasise the damage the wrong words can do. Titus 1:13-14 is very much to the point, which is sticking to the truth and avoiding false doctrine.
In Mark 5:18-20, we read of Jesus sending the newly cured Legion out simply to tell the people of the Decapolis about his own experience. When Jesus returned, in chapter 7:31, the people, who had begged Jesus to go away in 5:17, now flocked in their thousands to hear him.

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