

The Letter of St James

A Better Way of Living

Session Five: The Importance of words.

In our passage last week (2:14-26) James was concerned with Christian works, these would also have included what we say. He introduced the subject of the use of the tongue in 1:19, when he advised everyone to be “*slow to speak*”. Then again in 1:26 he cautions everyone “*to keep a tight rein*” on their tongue. This also introduces the imagery of 3:2-3.

Read James 3:1-12

1. In verse 1 is addressing teachers and those who desire to become teachers and issues a warning. What is his warning and why does he make it?
2. In verse 2-12 he addresses all believers telling them why the tongue needs to be controlled. What reasons does he give?
3. In verses 7-8 he reminds people how difficult it is to control the tongue. Why is it so difficult?
4. Why does he use the idea of “*all kinds of animal*” in verse 7 and how does this enhance the warning in verse 8?
5. What point is James at pains to bring out in verses 9-12 and how does he emphasise the importance of this point?
6. The term ‘*tame*’ does not mean domesticated in his context. Think of an alternative word.
7. Notice how James uses the pronoun ‘*we*’ in this passage. Why does he do that?
8. Can you think of any other passages in the Bible that concentrate on teaching and the importance of what we say?

In 5:12 James returns to the use of the tongue and with great emphasis warns, “*Above all*” don’t misuse the Lord’s name, neither in profanity nor blasphemy. He is repeating Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5:33-37. Apparently the Jews had various ways of distinguishing between how they used oaths, some were binding, but some were not and could be employed to cheat someone else. This is what Jesus was speaking about in Matthew 23:16-22. A Christian’s word should be his bond and James says this by returning to Matthew 5:37 and the words of Jesus, “Let your ‘yes’ be yes, and your ‘no’, no”. He is not referring to the proper use of oaths. We find plenty of these in the Bible, e.g. Genesis 22:16; 1 Kings 17:1; Philippians 1:8 and Revelation 10:6.

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July 2020