
Prayers

To God

Pray to ask the Lord for what is on your heart. You have been called to 'seek and find', 'ask and receive', so do this. Make sure that you are in tune with God's will, and 'ask' and 'seek' His will and yours.

For myself

Weekly theme: doubts

Pray for those who work in academia, where doubt is a necessary part of the creative and intellectual process, leading to rethinking of things and the furtherance of science and knowledge. Pray for any academics you know, that they may have faith in Jesus, and in God their creator, without doubts.

For others

Bless those we love this day, Lord Jesus. Keep them in Your care and protect them from all evil. If there are problems between us, may we be humble enough to let you heal us; and when we are at peace together, may we give You the glory, for You have given us each other. Praise be to You, Lord Jesus, AMEN

Meditation

When You look into our eyes, O Lord, what do you see?

Loving compassion and concern for others?
Or suppressed emotions due to of past troubles?

A deep desire to do what is right without exception?
Or only the will to do what it suits us, and little else?

Genuine interest in and care for all those we meet?
Or a harmful desire to impose ourselves on others?

A heart for what is right, just and true, without compromise?
Or an inner urge to twist all to our own advantage?

The will, drive and purpose of one who lives for You?
Or only the singular intent to pursue self interest?

Challenge us and cleanse us according to Your will, O Lord.

Bible Passage

James 3:1-5

¹ Not many of you should become teachers, dear friends, for you know that we will be judged more strictly; ² for we all make many mistakes. But the person who makes no mistakes in speech is mature, and able to keep the whole body in check.

³ Now bits are placed into horses mouths to make them obey us, and in this way, we control their whole bodies; ⁴ or take the example of ships, for although they are very large it takes strong winds to drive them, and they are guided wherever the pilot directs by a very small rudder.

⁵ In the same way, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great claims! Consider how a small spark can set a whole forest ablaze!

Review

In yesterday's passage, we read about James' teaching on faith, and we discovered that James taught forthrightly about faith being shown in what people do. It was a controversial subject in the first century, and has remained so into the present age. People sometimes struggle with the idea that pure faith is not something purely 'spiritual', but is demonstrated in everyday life. James may well have been aware that as he spoke about such things he was treading on the very edges of what some might accept as Christian doctrine.

So in today's passage, James reflects on what it means to be a teacher. He begins by commending a teacher who is able to control his speech as '*mature*', and someone who is able to be in control of every faculty (3:2). This sounds a daunting description of a Gospel teacher! James then extends his illustration by describing how a '*bit*' in a horses mouth is used to control and guide the animal (3:3), and then paints a picture of a ship being steered through high winds by a small rudder (3:4). But it is at the end of this brief reading where we begin to find what is really on James' heart. At this point we are not sure whether James is speaking positively or negatively about the small items that control bigger things! Certainly, the teacher can have a great influence on people's lives. But at the end of this brief passage, James finally reflects that the words people say have a great impact on life; '*consider how a small spark can set a whole forest ablaze*' (4:5), and we realise his essential point. Words can be used for great effect, for good or for ill.

But is James merely reflecting on the impact of his own teaching and the debates that it has caused? Is he defending his own authority and maturity as a Christian teacher? Or is he just making a powerful comment about how bad speech and immature teaching can be destructive of the church of God? I am uncertain that we can answer these questions conclusively, and all three might well be partially true. However, if we want to understand what James says here, then we should remember James' position in the church.

James was an apostle and the brother of Jesus, and he could remember living and working together with the Lord. Surely that must have counted for something? Jesus was more than a great teacher who taught the truth, and it seems that James speaks of Him here as a perfect teacher '*who makes no mistake*' (3:2); Christ was mature and wise, and He alone

taught the truth about God. By comparison, the limitations of human leadership were easy to identify, but surely, the Christian teacher should be modelled on the perfect example of Christ!

Teaching was an accepted and important calling within the life of the early church (see Rom 12:7, Eph 4:11). The teacher had the primary responsibility of preparing candidates for baptism and ensuring that the Faith was passed on. This is why James says here that the task of teaching will be '*judged more strictly*' by God (3:1). There was no room for people to teach what was incorrect about the Gospel message, or about who Jesus was, or about faith and the Kingdom of God. In the early days, these things were taken to be absolute truths verified by the apostles themselves, so much so that when they died out, the church had to find a different way of authenticating Christian teaching. This is why the great 'confessions', or 'creeds', were written down; they were based on the teaching of the apostles (see the 'Apostles' Creed') and contained what they believed to be the pure and true teaching of the apostles, to be passed down to future generations.

Bearing all this in mind, verses 1 to 4 of this passage are best read as a development of this theme. James brings out the need for the teacher to be controlled and mature, and dedicated to passing on the important truths of God's revelation in Christ. Whilst today, it might seem wise to be humble before the Gospel and stand back from claiming too much personal knowledge or even 'the truth', James is not so concerned. He is far more worried about the accuracy of the Gospel message and the importance of handing on the Gospel story, which was so fresh in his memory. For him, the teacher who made mistakes in this task was of course to be judged more severely (3:1); the Gospel had to be passed on without mistakes, or more literally, '*without stumbling*' (from the original meaning of the Greek).

The two illustrations in the centre of our passage (3:3,4) develop James' idea about control and maturity in teaching. So the bit in the mouth of a horse enables the rider to control the horse and travel as required and the rudder of a ship steers it to its destination. We might imagine that James' next point would be that teaching is like the 'control' that guides the church safely through stormy seas! But no, James decides to make a more general point about the manner in which speech affects the whole of life. He describes the tongue as a '*small part of the body, but it makes great claims*' (3:5). The message to the teacher is therefore this; watch your words! And although the message for all who read this is the same, it is perhaps less pointed.

Perhaps James had seen the effect on the church of teachers who did not have as much control of the tongue as they ought, and who created confusion by false teaching. There is certainly historical evidence of church groups of the first and second century AD developing strange heretical teaching far removed from the teaching of the apostles. James may have wanted to expose false teaching or he may have been thinking of the ungracious comments of the rich (2:1-4) and the disturbing way in which this created inequality in the church. His point, however, is clear. A great responsibility lies upon each Christian to know the truth and declare it; like a spark that can '*light a forest fire*'. Either good words light the fire of the Gospel or evil words destroy it (3:5).

To this day, many who read James' words feel convicted about their bad language. They ask, how may the tongue be controlled? James does not answer this question because he is writing about the importance of right teaching in the church not about pastoral issues to do with bad language. Nevertheless, James' writing does point the reader to Jesus, who is the 'truth' Himself, and whose Gospel brings us peace with God. This is the singular truth James is concerned to protect because it is the Gospel of salvation for all who repent, and those who have pastoral issues with bad speech will find redemption in this Gospel, as will all sinners.

Discipleship

Application

Teaching and teachers

To this day, it is important that teachers maintain the heritage of the classical Christian truths as handed down to us, and James' warning is an important caution to all who teach the Faith. But I ask you, who is your teacher? We seem to lack teachers in the church today. We like our pastors and leaders and expect them to teach us, but do we identify the gift of teaching and hold this as important as the many other gifts used in the life of the church? Certainly, if we want the Gospel to be passed down consistently then we need teachers who are accredited as being those who know the Gospel themselves, without doubts and questions. There are indeed many rough edges to our fullest understanding of God, but in Christ we have a Saviour, and without this being communicated, we fail to pass on the Gospel.

The tongue

James' teaching about the tongue is a reminder to every teacher and every Christian to 'watch their words'. Even as I write these studies, I am aware that I stand in judgement for what I write, and I pray every day that what is published will be true to God's truth and His purposes for what I do. But each of us have the task of passing on the Gospel, and should hear this word accordingly.

Ideas for what to do

- *If you are worried about things you say which are not very worthy, ask someone to pray with you about this.*
- *Who has taught you most about the Christian faith? Make sure you honour God the Holy Spirit above the person who taught you!*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What place do 'teachers' (of the faith) have within the church today? How can we improve 'teaching' within our churches?
2. What kind of abilities are required for a 'teacher' within the church? Draw up a 'job specification'.
3. Is the tongue the only part of us that needs to be 'bridled'? Think about others parts of our bodies which can create difficulties for the witness of the church.

Final Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, bring us joy we pray. Lead our hearts to sing to You, to be free, to laugh and cry out loud and be unashamed of our emotions. Then, when we are at liberty in Your presence, speak to us, we pray, through the joy of Your presence. Thank You for this privilege Lord Jesus: AMEN

