

Feb. 11, 2018

Lesson 11: A Disciplined Faith

Scripture: James 3: 1-12

Context:

Today we jump ahead in our study on the Book of James to chapter three. Last week, we reflected how a faith without works is dead. Today's section turns to the more practical part of the author's point. In the chapters before, the author gave examples of misused speech: words that honor the privileged and not the poor, not greeting a brother or sister without giving assistance, and claiming to have faith without works to show it.¹ The author now moves to one of the main source of speech: the tongue. The tongue becomes a metaphor for the works that come with faith.

The context for the writer comes at an important time in the early development of the church. According to sources outside the Bible, Christians were being persecuted and martyred for confessing that Christ is Lord. Josephus, in his memoirs *Antiquities*, noted that Agrippa arrested John because of the popularity of his teachings just as the Dead Sea Scrolls indicate that the Teacher of Righteousness was persecuted by the religious authorities in Jerusalem.² Thus, teachers were more strictly evaluated in religious communities as they sat in places of honor and at any moment could be condemned by other religious authorities or political systems threatened by their teaching. We even see that in the trial of Jesus, it was his outburst in the Temple, healing on the Sabbath, and the declaration as son of the living God that led to his death. Jesus was teaching that there was a power more powerful than the Roman emperor, a proclaimed demi-god in the ancient world. The tongue is powerful and so is wisdom and knowledge.

Thus, the opening verse of the chapter addresses that those who are teachers in the church community are in such a position to share their wisdom with others. Those who share their teaching with others are given great responsibility. Their words matter and are to be reflected upon. James is suggesting that teachers aren't necessarily perfect as he alludes in verse 2, but there is a way to grow as they teach and equip others.

To drive home the point that teachers and others can lead, James connects how the tongue is part of the sharing that wisdom with three allusions that would have spoken to different groups of people. In each case, the tongue is something that can be controlled and cultivated for good. For those who know horses, he talks about how a bit helps lead a horse in the direction that they need to go as their whole body is led that way. For those familiar with ships, he talks about the ships that are directed by strong winds. But the small rudder can change the course and help the ship go in a different direction. The last allusion is to a small flame. All it takes is one spark and a whole forest is set ablaze.

All these allusions point to how the tongue can be used for good or bad. In the same breath that we use the tongue to bless and praise our Lord, we use it curse brothers and sisters. Blessing and cursing come from the same place. For the author, this is

¹ PHEME PERKINS, "First and Second Peter, James, and Jude," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1995), 115.

² *Ibid.* 116.

something that should be reflected upon. There are differences in blessing and cursing just as there are differences between fresh water and salt water and fig trees and olive trees. One cannot produce the other.

For the writer the point is that a double-tongued Christian is not a possibility. Christians must learn to control their tongues. James is challenging the assumption that speech is casual. Words mean something. As he underlines the power of the tongue, James is reminding readers that any success they have in wisdom and in disciplining speech is a gift from God.³ With God, the tongue can be bridled and people can be made whole in God's image.

Application:

As I read this passage, I was taken back to the advice I was given as a child that was often given by others when a bully came towards you with their insults. Maybe you've heard it before or even said it: "Sticks and bones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." For the moment, it may have been the piece of advice needed. Yet, I've found that eventually the phrase loses its flavor. Words do matter. They can hurt deeply and cause people to feel afraid or to have anxiety. Or they can do wonders for a person's soul. They can uplift or give life. Words and phrases that we use in our language with one another carry a meaning.

As Christians, this passage should speak to us every day. Our tongues do hold more power than we realize. As I write this, I can think of the many times where I have remembered people's words that have either built me up or torn me down. Sometimes the people meant well, but other times I picked up on the malice or their own insecurities. I also can think of the times where I have used words that either hurt or helped others. In the case of our tongue, we have all had good moments and moments where we let our tongue spread its deadly poison.

One thing that bothers me more lately are "tongues" becoming more loosened when not dealing directly with a person. It is as if somehow the person or group of people not being present allows for more freedom in how they can be addressed. With the rise of technology, I have seen more and more Christians (and others) feel the need to post their views on Facebook or Twitter. Sadly though, they are no longer posed in "This is what I believe," or "Could this be another way to see the situation?" Instead, long posts where Christians use ugly names to vilify people and even other Christians are used. Cruel memes are posted targeting another person or group with a sarcastic or jeering comment. Like James brings up, a fire is started by a small spark and before you know it, there is a whole forest burning with people who don't even know each other attacking one another. That is still the work of the "tongue." If you would not say that to the person you just attacked or defamed, then you shouldn't post at all.

For James, mature Christians are those who bridle their tongue. To me, this just isn't about our conversations sitting across from our family or friends. This is about the e-mail we compose or the text message we send. This is about that article we post or the status we make on Facebook that labels "those people" as the problem. As we live in a world that values "saying it like it is" and even using social media to let the "other" know how we think, we are reminded that God has called us to be mature in how we

³ Ibid., 120.

communicate with one another. We are called to speak the truth in love and to use our words to build one another up. If we are to profess Christ as Lord with our lips, then we are to do so with our words as well.

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