

Series 'Faith that Works'

James 3

Words and Wisdom

Sunshine and Tewanin

29-9-2024

Today we come to the third in our series from the book of James, 'Faith that Works'. We're looking at James Chapter 3 and our specific topic this morning 'Words and Wisdom'. So there are two ideas here

-Words (the theme in v's 1-12) and

-Wisdom (the theme in v's 13-18)

When James talks about words he uses the image of the tongue (v's 1-12). And he uses some very striking metaphors to describe the tongue and the power of words.

When James addresses the theme of wisdom (v's 13-18) he calls on us to resist 'harbouring bitter envy and selfish ambition in order to be peace loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere'.

Being wise involves both the words we use and the lives we lead. It is about both the tongue and the feet. It is about both the talk and the walk. It is in fact about walking the talk.

In v13 James says that wisdom produces deeds done in humility. And I would suggest wisdom also produces a tamed tongue that speaks out of humility.

So where does this wisdom come from? There are two possibilities it

-either has its source in God or

-it is just up to us to try harder using our own wit and wisdom.

Tapping into God is a gospel centred approach.

Simply trying harder to tame the tongue and do good deeds, is a moralistic approach.

And as followers of Jesus, I take it we want to be gospel people, not moralistic people.

So how do we tap into this gospel source, rather than rely on our own resources?

Think of the analogy of a river. If you live downstream and you rely on the river for your supply of drinking water, you will be doing everything you can to get clean water. If you notice a dead cow or some other pollutant floating down the river you make sure you get it out before you collect your drinking water. If the water is particularly polluted, you may have to establish all sorts of safeguards eg. put up barriers or build a filtration plant.

Or alternatively what would be a better solution?

Go to the source of the river and find out what's causing the pollution. Deal with the problem at its source.

Well, I think this is what James is talking about V's 9 to 12. Let me just read verses 10 and 11, *"Out of the same mouth come praising and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?"* It's a rhetorical question and the answer of course is no. If you're getting salt water that's undrinkable, look for a different source, find a spring that is producing fresh water.

And the images in v12 work in the same way. If you are looking for olives don't go to a fig tree. To source olives you have to go to an olive tree. Likewise, if you're looking for grapes, don't go to a fig tree, go to a grapevine.

So what is the source of this wisdom? We learned the source back in Chapter 1:18 where James says, *"He chose to give us birth through the Word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created"*. It is the new birth through the word of truth that makes the difference. And v21 he goes on to say, *"Humbly accept the Word planted in you which can save you."*

What is this word? Well if it is the word of truth that produces a new birth then it would have to be the message of Jesus. In Ch 2:1 he talks about *"our glorious Lord Jesus Christ"*.

Jesus is the fresh spring that is the source of wisdom - that issues in both good deeds and wholesome words.

So when we speak a bad word about someone don't just say, "Oh no I have to try harder next time." Recognise that your words came out of a corrupted human heart, a saltwater polluted spring. Renounce it and go to the freshwater spring, Jesus Christ.

Likewise, if you do something out of bitter envy or selfish ambition, don't just say, "I'll try and do better next time". Renounce it and throw yourself afresh on Jesus who can give you the living water welling up to eternal life.

With that context let us look especially at the tongue and the words we use. I want to focus on the tongue rather than good deeds as we dealt with good deeds thoroughly in Chapter 2; and most of Chapter 3 is given over to the power of the tongue. So let's talk about the tongue.

Firstly, James has a special word for teachers. He says those who teach will be judged more strictly. That is a sobering word for all clergy, but I think it is a word for all who use words as a tool of trade. So it could also apply to school teachers, politicians, lawyers etc, etc. Anyone in a leadership role can use words to influence the life of a community for great evil or great good. I believe all leaders who use words to influence others will be judged more strictly.

But what about the influence you have in your family, with friends, or in the groups you belong to. We all use words and they can influence a situation for good or bad.

James uses 3 images for the tongue. These images seem small and inconsequential.

[Photo Slides]

- A bit or bridle
- A rudder
- A spark

But look what they control.

- A horse
- A ship
- A forest fire

These are images of power. Tiny items which have great power. -the bit, the rudder, the small spark all seem harmless. But the horse, the ship and the forest fire are all very powerful. The small insignificant item controls what is large and powerful.

- The bit in the mouth of a horse can turn the whole animal one way or another.
- The rudder on a ship allows the pilot to direct it one way or another.
- The small spark can set a great forest on fire.

So also the tongue is a tiny item, but it has great power. It is the power of words.

There are life words and death words. Proverbs 18:21 says, *"The tongue has the power of life and death."*

There are death words.

When the Pharisees were plotting to kill Jesus they called a meeting of the Sanhedrin, and Caiaphas the high priest that year says to them in John 11:49, *"You know nothing at all! You do not realise that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish"*.

The Sanhedrin, the Jewish leadership, was supposed to uphold the Torah, the law of God; which would bring blessing when obeyed. Instead the Sanhedrin are plotting murder. The high priest Caiaphas uses death words.

But there are also life words.

Luke 4:22, *"All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips."*

Mark 6:2, at the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus was teaching and the response of the crowd is, *"Where did this man get these things? What's this wisdom that has been given him?"*

John 6:68, Simon Peter said, *"You have the words of eternal life."*

Jesus spoke life words and all the people were amazed.

Look at the two approaches to life in the second half of the passage

In terms of vs14-16, Death Words have to do with harbouring bitter envy and selfish ambition. Without Christ as Lord people become very proud. And that is when a person starts to envy those who they see as having more gifts than them, or being better off than them.

It is proud people who pursue selfish ambition. So it doesn't matter if they treat people badly on their way up the corporate ladder. A simple test is whether a person speaks to their boss and to their subordinates in the same way, with the same respect. Or do they use life words with their boss but death words with their subordinates.

The death words may not be straight out abusive language, but simply words that quickly dismiss another person and what they are saying.

On the other hand in verses 17 and 18 we find the attitude which produces life words. This person is peace loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. A peacemaker who reaps a harvest of righteousness.

This is a humble person and therefore someone who looks out for the needs of others, and uses whatever power and influence they have for the common good rather than selfish ambition. This person will be full of life words, building others up, offering encouragement and showing great wisdom.

How do we speak life words into another person's life. It can sometimes be a struggle to find the right word can't it? One of the best ways is to not be thinking about what you're going to say next but simply listening.

Life words are not about a lot of words. It'd not like the encouraging words of the coach before the team runs out onto the field, it is about simply listening. Listening deeply. And then offering one or two little words that show you have heard not just their words but their heart. These will be words that are peace loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

Remember that back in James 1:19 he said everyone should be quick to listen and slow to speak. We all know the old proverb that we were given two ears and one mouth and therefore we should do twice as much listening as speaking.

In his book "7 Habits of Highly Effective People" Stephen Covey expresses the importance of listening in his Habit 5 which is, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood." He uses this illustration, 'Suppose you've been having trouble with your eyes and you decide to go to the Optometrist for help. After briefly listening to your complaint, he takes off his glasses and hands them to you. "Put these on", he says. "I've worn this pair of glasses for 10 years now and they really helped me. I have an extra pair at home; you can wear these." So you put them on, but it only makes the problem worse. "This is terrible!" you exclaim. "I can't see a thing!" "Well, what's wrong?" He asks. "They work great for me. Try harder." "I am trying," you insist. "Everything is a blur." "Well, what's the matter with you? Think positively." "OK. I positively can't see a thing." "Boy, are you ungrateful!" he chides. "And after all I've done to help you."

Would you go back to that optometrist? I don't think so.

How often do we think we have the perfect solution for someone but all we are wanting is for them to see the world through our lenses. So we're not really listening we are just waiting for the opportunity to talk and set them straight.

Encouragement happens when we listen deeply and don't try and prescribe too quickly. Encouragement happens when we speak life words that show empathy with the other person.

So my friends James Chapter 3 is about words and wisdom. It is about having the humility to tame the tongue so that we speak life words not death words. We speak with the wisdom that comes from heaven v17, rather than speaking from the corrupted human heart which harbours bitter envy and selfish ambition.

I want to conclude by taking us back to that illustration of tracing a river to its source. Don't just deal with the muck that is at the mouth of the river, pun intended! Go to the source. Clean out the source. Ask God to change it from a salty spring to a freshwater spring.

I love the way Eugene Peterson translates this verse. He says, "You're not going to dip into a polluted mud hole and get a cup of clear, cool water, are you?"

So you have to ask God to give you a new spring from which to dip. Or in other words, ask God to change your heart. A whole new life in Christ is what you need.

Jesus said to the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, "*Whoever drinks from the water I give them, will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.*"

My friends let us all drink from this well, and be wise people who tame our tongues and speak only life words to one another.