



Sermon: "Watch Your Words!"

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[Watch the Sermon](#)

Be careful what you wish for! I remember a few friends of mine in Bible College who were keen to become pastors. They looked forward to becoming a leader and to having a thriving ministry that helped many. When we finished our graduate programs a few of them found placements fairly quickly as pastors in small churches.

One friend became pastor of a small church in the country. I remember how we all congratulated him and how happy he was. That happiness didn't last very long. He struggled in his new role. He had been a schoolteacher but now he was leading small church family. He was leading a group of people he had never known before. He was used to the city and now he was serving in the country. He found it difficult to connect with the community he was serving.

Looking back at my friend's experience, I used to think the difficulty of leading was found by the team you led. But now I think the difficulty of leading is found within the leader themselves! What I mean is, the difficulty of leading others isn't in getting others to do something. The difficulty of leading is making sure that you yourself are doing what you are calling others to do! And the difficulty of leading others isn't about how others respond to you; it's about how you respond to others! As a leader your biggest critic is God, because He holds you more responsible for your words and actions than those you are serving.

In our portion of the book of James today, we will see this principle. Leaders are "judged more strictly" to obey what they are calling others to say and do. To the churches James is writing to, if they are showing favouritism, they will be judged, they will be disciplined by God. If their leaders are showing favouritism, that judgement, that discipline will be even worse!

We remember from the weeks previous, that James has been calling the new followers of Jesus who have fled persecution in Jerusalem to humbly receive the word of God, which had been planted within their heart. James is calling them back reliance on the Holy Spirit. The new followers have been relying on themselves and ignoring God's word and as a result they been clinging to the rich and influential for help. They have favoured the rich and treated the poor with contempt.

In today's account, James now turns to the leaders of these new followers, and he gives them a stern warning if they should continue to act with favouritism. He warns them that if they continue to act shamefully, they will not be growing in the grace and peace provided in Jesus. Instead, they will be in danger of God's judgment and discipline.

1.) Be Careful About Being a Leader

¹ Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. ² We all stumble in many ways.

In James 3:1–2, James seems to be speaking directly to those new followers of Jesus who are in positions of leadership. And he makes sure he speaks to them as equals! He calls them "my fellow believers." He isn't

speaking down to them. He isn't judging them. He seems to be reminding them that he isn't calling them to obey his words, but their Lord's. This James, may be the same James whom Paul called a "pillar" of the church, yet who recognized the grace given to Paul and agreed with him that Paul ought to go to the Gentiles while he continued to serve the Jews (Galatians 2:1–10). James didn't use his position in the church to demand obedience to himself, but used his position to recognize and encourage others to follow the Lord.

This humble brother in such an eminent position in the expanding Church says to these young-in-the-faith brothers and sisters, "not many should become teachers!" His reason? "They will be judged more strictly!" To be sure, "Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task" (1 Timothy 3:1), but no leader should think they will escape God's judgment since, as James reminds them, "we all stumble in many ways!" This means leaders WILL stumble and WILL be judged more strictly! This should be a red-flag warning to the leaders in the churches. Those leaders that have shown favouritism to the rich and influential and treated the poor badly.

If the leaders reading James' letter remembered their covenant history with God, they would remember how Moses was prevented from entering into the Promised Land because he did not obey God. This account should remind the leaders of the new followers how accountable they were before God. In that account, the Israelites are complaining to Moses and Aaron that they have no water. They shouted, "Why did you bring the LORD's community into this wilderness, that we and our livestock should die here" (Numbers 20)? They cry out to Moses for the figs, grapevines and pomegranates that they had in Egypt.

Moses turns to the LORD, and the LORD's command, His word is simple. He says, "take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. SPEAK to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water." Sounds simple. Moses gathers the assembly together in front of the rock and SHOUTS at them! "Listen, you rebels, must we bring water out of this rock?" Moses then raises his arm and STRIKES the rock twice with his staff. For this disobedience, the LORD says to Moses, "because you did not trust in me enough to honour me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them."

Moses, the one God used to deliver a rebellious people, the one some called, "more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth," will not enter the Promised Land, where others will.

James is warning the leaders of the early church. He is saying that they WILL stumble as leaders and, in fact, HAVE stumbled and WILL therefore be judged and disciplined more strictly as a result.

2.) The Significance of Words

Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check. ³When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. ⁴Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. ⁵Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. ⁶The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

In James 3:3–6, James then reminds the new followers of the importance of what they say to others. Maybe the leaders of the new followers were thinking that their actions were more significant than their words. Maybe they justified their abuse of the poor by telling them to "not get in the way" of the more important brothers and sisters. Maybe they thought these abusive words were...ONLY WORDS! Maybe they thought good deeds, good actions were the sign of true faith. The rich provided the resources to do good works. The poor gave nothing other than their stories of how God rescued and redeemed them.

God attempts to correct these leaders through James with words. God says that words are very important. They are just as important as actions. Metaphors are given as examples. It only takes a bit in the mouth of a horse to guide it. It only takes a small rudder to steer a ship. Then God says through James, remember that your words can be like a spark that sets a “great forest” to flame.

Didn't the leaders and new followers remember the power of God's word at Pentecost? Peter preached the Good News of Jesus and thousands came to faith by the power of the Holy Spirit! Thousands more came to hear the words of the apostles and to share their belongings in humility as the words called them to do. How could these new followers and their leaders think that their words to the poor were mere words? The Holy Spirit was given to them in order that they might know and remember the words of Jesus their Saviour! The words of God were already like a fire that was setting a great global forest, to flame.

God is guiding his children, these new followers, through James to see that their words become godly.

3.) No One Can Tame the Tongue

⁷ All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, ⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

In James 3:7–8, James reminds the leaders of the new churches spread out in the neighbouring regions not to pretend that they are, in themselves, strong or perfect. He's even reminding them that they aren't stronger or more nearly perfect than others! He says that no one can tame their tongue. No one can control what they say all the time. James wants them to stop walking in their flesh, to stop trying to live their lives by making their own decisions. He wants them to cling again to the word of God planted in their heart by Jesus. He wants them to rely on that word and the power and fellowship of God's Spirit in order to obey.

James would have these leaders of the new followers to speak to the rich and poor “with psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:19). These musical expressions showing a heart that is free and full of God's love.

3.) Who are We Speaking to? God's Children

⁹ With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. ¹¹ Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? ¹² My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

Finally, in James 3:9–12, James seems to be making another strong call for obedience. He says that there are no people who are walking with the Lord in obedience while also showing favouritism. One excludes the other. Leaders and their followers are not walking with the Lord while they are mistreating their poor brothers and sisters. All must be served equally. God had said that He gave gifts through His Spirit to each follower SO THAT that they would treat each other the same. These words are God's words and so must be obeyed. If they are mistreating some, if they are showing favouritism, they are neglecting this word planted within them.

These words are difficult to receive but true. How can followers of God praise Him and then treat His children with contempt? James is again holding up a mirror to their actions. He is showing the new followers and their leaders that they are only thinking of themselves. They are looking for ways to calm their fears. Their fear is making them so selfish that they miss what is obvious. How can they think that God is pleased to hear their praise, when they turn around and curse His children?

It's possible that God would be reminding them, by His Spirit, of His words to Israel through Isaiah. God had said to Israel through Isaiah that mercy was more important than sacrifice. He said regarding their religious practice, "the multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?...I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats...Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me...(Your sacrifices) have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them...Your hands are full of blood!...Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow" (Isaiah 1).

James has held a mirror up so that these new followers and their leaders may chose repentance, that they may chose returning to the words of God and the fellowship, the oneness they have with Him through Jesus through the gentle guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Application

1.) What God's Call of Obedience to You?

Let's take a few moments to ask God how He is calling us to apply His word. Let's stop and realize that He is speaking with each of us because none of us can always control what we say to others. Take a minute to pray to God for an application of how to follow Him and not our own ideas.

2.) Speak to God's Children

When we speak with our spouses, our family members and even with our neighbours, we are speaking to those created by God. We are all created by God to bear His image and to glorify Him and His Kingdom. We are never speaking to someone who is unimportant. Each person can be a vessel created by God in order to speak to us. Each person has value.

There is a helpful illustration of this in the account in the Old Testament. King David is fleeing Jerusalem because his son, Absalom, is attempting to take over the kingdom. While he is fleeing, there is a man named Bahurim, himself a descendant of King Saul whom David displaced as the King of Israel. Bahurim is cursing David as he flees Jerusalem from Absalom. Maybe Bahurim is thinking that finally David is being displaced as king by Absalom just as David had done to his relative, Saul. Bahurim says, "Get out, get out, you murderer, you scoundrel! The LORD has repaid you for all the blood you shed in the household of Saul, in whose place you have reigned" (2 Samuel 16).

Two of those with David, respond in the flesh to these curses on their king. They respond in a way that reveals they think of themselves as superior to Bahurim. They look down on this descendent of Saul. They say to David, "Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over and cut off his head." But David sees in Bahurim, a child of God. He sees in Bahurim an image bearer of his LORD. So his reply is, "If (Bahurim) is cursing because the LORD said to him, 'Curse David,' who can ask, 'Why do you do this?'"

David showed no favouritism even to those that were cursing him, because he knew he was no better a person than Bahurim. Bahurim said that David was a murderer. Remember that David in a few chapter previous to this incident had Uriah murdered so he could take Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, as his wife. David doesn't judge Bahurim, because he is guilty as well before God and not a judge of anyone.

I have a personal example. I had a conversation some time ago with someone who told me that I was not a suitable leader. This person had recognized experience in leadership and was quite successful in their field. This person may have felt that I would be offended by their critique, but I felt that God was speaking to me through that person. I felt that there were many areas in my life, areas in my service to others that I hadn't given over to God in faith. But God had also already told me, before I spoke with this person, that He loved me and had given me some gifts to share with others. If I would rest in Him and what He could do through me, I

would be walking with His power and His Spirit. I may not be what others think I should be, but I am what He has made me to be at this point in my walk with Him.

Let us speak to each other as if speaking to God's children, because we are. Let us listen to one another as if we are listening to God's children, because they are.

Conclusion

1.) What God's Call of Obedience to You?

2.) Speak to God's Children