

The Tongue of a Teacher

Proper 19

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James 3:1-12

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” That’s how God inspired James to begin this section of his letter. Teachers, that is, pastors, will be judged harder than others in the church. That is why the author of Hebrews also wrote to “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account (Hebrews 13:17).”

As ones who have to give an account, then, pastors must be self-controlled. They must not be drunkards, quick to violence, but patient and gentle. This requires control over their entire bodies, but especially their tongues.

Why would pastors need to keep strict control over their tongues? In addition, does that mean that others in the church don’t have to guard their tongues? These are the kinds of questions we’ll be considering as we hear from God through this writing from James.

Verse 1

“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.”

While James began by mentioning pastors—and the rest of his words also apply to pastors—he wrote that “we all stumble in many ways.” “(W)e all” refers to all of us, pastors and members alike. But while James admits that he and we all stumble in many ways, he is going to get to a specific area in which to pay particular attention: that area being the tongue, that is, one’s speech, yours and mine.

James wrote that if one does not stumble in what he says, he is perfect. This is not to say that the man no longer sins in any way. James is not saying that sinlessness is attainable in this life. No, he was guiding his hearers to know that the bridling of the tongue is part of the self-control mentioned in the fruits of the Spirit—something which is worked into the new man by the Holy Spirit.

So if any desire to speak about God, even as members of the royal priesthood, those ones should examine themselves to see if they have bridled their tongues. God will judge those who speak about Him as to whether they speak according to His Word or not. Those who choose not to speak about God will not be judged in this way. Yet this is not a call *not* to speak about God, but a word to remember to not depart from God’s Word when speaking about Him.

Verse 2

“How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed

and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”

While horses and ships can be controlled by such small things as bridles and rudders, a small spark grows into a raging fire which cannot be controlled and is very difficult and challenging to extinguish. Is that small spark not unlike a “little white lie?” With that one “little white lie” told to excuse oneself from something, another must be told to maintain it—and then one to maintain that one—and then another to maintain those. Before long, everyone is angry and hurt, including the one to whom you told the first lie to try to quote-unquote “protect” him or her from something. How easy is it to extinguish the huge flame sparked from a “little white lie?”

What is more, when one misspeaks about God, it can do damage to your neighbor. If one misleads little ones, it is better for what? A millstone to be hung around that person’s neck and for that person to be drowned. But speaking about doctrine isn’t just precision in speaking—it’s speaking from the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It’s speaking what you have heard from God’s Word. So it’s true that not all should speak about God, and yet all of you are members of the royal priesthood Peter wrote about. So what do you say, if you don’t feel that you are called to speak about God? What did the disciples say in bringing each other to Jesus but “Come and see”?

Yet so often we speak in ways which are not “Come and see.” Jesus said that it is out of the heart that great evils come; and these are the evils which are then spoken by the tongue and set communities ablaze—which communities? Those around us. Remember the example of the “little white lie” and how that can spread. So often we misuse our tongues.

Verse 3

“With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.”

Here James gets to the Law: our tongues are a cosmos evil because we at our hearts are evil. That is why Jesus came to our cosmos, to our very world. Jesus came, lived and spoke good things among us, and then died on the cross. He died on the cross to pay for all the times we have spoken evil, or spoke when we should not have, or failed to speak when we should have—for these sins and all others, Jesus died on the cross. When He hung His head in death, He said, “It is finished.” That is, our salvation—yours and mine—has been accomplished.

Now we have received the Spirit and we have been made new creations. No longer do we speak salt water, we speak fresh water. No longer are we evil trees, we are good trees, and we have the Spirit in us so that we may bear good fruit. Now the Spirit is at work in each of us—me and you—so that we may use our tongues for great good—so that we speak when we should, so that we don’t speak when we shouldn’t, and so that we can proclaim Christ crucified and risen—whether that’s as pastor with a call, members of the royal priesthood who feel that they should talk about God, or as ones who simply tell others, “Come—come and see!”

May God continue to grant us His Holy Spirit that we may do these things to His glory and for the benefit of our neighbors. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

