

James 3:1-5a May 27, 2007

Alright – grab your Bibles and let's move on in our study of James. We wrapped up chapter 2 with a look back last week which means this morning we are beginning chapter 3. So open your Bibles to James 3:1-5, we'll stop halfway through verse 5 this morning.

TEXT

Now remember, this is a letter. James didn't write in chapters and verses – that came later. And it may seem like there is a weird break here again – like James stopped and went out to watch the finale of American Idol or something before coming back in to finish this – and he may have done that. Not watch American Idol but taken a break in writing – I don't know – but what he writes here still flows out of what he has been saying both throughout the letter and at the end of chpt. 2.

Think about it. He just got through hammering home the truth that faith without works is dead and useless. Now he opens up talking about teachers and our mouths. Well that truth is going to be especially condemning to the one who knows the truth well enough to teach it, but refuses to live by what he teaches.

And just like we can't separate what we do from what we BELIEVE, we can't separate who we are from what we SAY.

You might think somehow that you can. That you can say I'm spiritual even though I gossip. I'm spiritual even though I slander others. I'm spiritual even though I brag and boast. I'm spiritual even though all I ever do is complain. No – no you're not. The Bible makes it clear that how you speak reveals who you are. And that's the point we'll come to in chapter 3. So get ready. And this still flows out of all that James has been saying. That if your faith is real it will work. It will affect the way you respond to trials. It will affect the way you deal with temptation. It will affect the way you listen to God's Word. It will affect the way you go about worship. It will affect the way you respond to people. It will produce a lifestyle of good works. And now James is saying that your faith – if its real – will affect the way you speak. If you don't hear anything else this morning hear this – James is making it clear – **your WORDS matter.**

He mentions the tongue in every chapter. Twice in chapter 1 in verses 19 and 26. In chapter 2 verse 12. In chapter 4 verse 11 and 5 verse 12 that we haven't got to yet. But here in chapter 3 he spends a large amount of effort and time dealing specifically with the tongue. Why? Well let's look at what he says.

He says not many of you should presume to be teachers. Now remember he's writing to people who are primarily from a Jewish background. And Jewish people of that day in general had a great respect for their teachers. Wherever a rabbi – or teacher – went, he was treated with enormous respect. They looked up to their teachers and so many people in this church wanted to be teachers – they viewed teaching as a privileged position. What James wants us to understand is that its actually a position of great peril.

He says that we who teach will be judged more strictly. He says pay attention to the way you speak because God is paying attention to the way you speak and there is coming a day when we will all stand before God to be judged.

James isn't trying to keep men who are really called from becoming teachers – he's not trying to stop you from ever speaking God's Word to others – he's not trying to limit all that. He's just saying be cautious. When you embark upon the role of teacher at any level – whether it's official or unofficial – be cautious because the tongue has great potential to condemn you. That's **the first reason we need to pay attention to how we speak, because the tongue has great potential to CONDEMN you.**

I know it may seem old now, but the reason I pray every week before I preach that God would hide me behind the cross – that I wouldn't get in the way of what He wants to say – is this very thing. I don't want to stand condemned before God because of what I say in His pulpit.

Now you might say – well then I'll just never teach – I'll avoid that one right there. But look at verse 2 – he says “We all stumble in many ways.” And the implication that James is laying down is that the mouth is certainly one of the major ways we all stumble. This is a comprehensive word on the sinfulness of all of us. And **what James said about judgment wasn't that teachers ALONE will be judged for what they say, but that our judgment will be stricter. We'll all ANSWER for our words.** In fact turn to what Jesus said in **Matt 12:36-37.**

36 *But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken.*

37 *For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.*

The mouth is the monitor of the human condition. As a kid when you went to see the doctor, what was the first thing the doctor would say? “Let me see your tongue” – Aaaaauuuggghhh. James is saying the same thing. Let me see your tongue. Right words will be the manifestation of a righteous life, so he's calling us to measure our speech to see if it is consistent without what we claim to be the reality of our faith. So our tongues have incredible potential to condemn.

And he goes on from that in verse 2 and says, if anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.

Not only does the tongue have potential to condemn, it has great power to control. **We need to pay attention to how we speak because the tongue had great power to CONTROL you.** In other words, your entire life is affected by the way you speak. This isn't just true for those who teach, it is true for all of us.

Now there is an interesting sort of debate on what James means here. Does he mean perfect in the sense of absolutely perfect – like Jesus? He could mean that. He could be saying that if a man does not ever stumble – never sins – in his words, then he would be an absolutely perfect man. That's correct. And if he is saying that, then he is really saying that none of us are perfect. So forget about it. The idea that you might not stumble in your words – forget it because only perfect people don't do that and nobody's perfect. We all stumble in many ways.

On the other hand, when he says “perfect” he's using the word “**teleios**” here and that word translated perfect usually has the meaning **MATURE**. So what he is saying in a general sense is that if a man does not continue to stumble with his mouth or words, that man is a mature man – that **if you get control of your mouth, you are demonstrating spiritual MATURITY**. I lean towards that view. James is saying only spiritually mature people are able to control their tongue. Only Jesus had a perfectly controlled tongue. Peter says in 1 Pet 2:22 “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.”

So we can say – as John MacArthur explains it – that **to the degree that our holiness approaches the holiness of CHRIST, to the degree we are conformed to His image, to that degree will our speech be GODLY.**

And look at what he says in verse 2. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. Now get this – this is incredibly practical today – if a person can master his tongue, he can master his sinful tendencies throughout his body – which means his entire person.

Listen **the tongue is an instant expression of the HEART. Luke 6:45** says out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks. So the mouth can sin more readily and more often than any other member of the body just because of its circumstances. You can't get into a position to sin in every way with your body all the time, but you're always in a position to sin with your tongue.

So because the tongue can sin so easily, because the tongue is such a monitor of the condition of our hearts – if you can control the tongue – the greater sinner in your body – then you can control the lesser – the less common sin issues in your body. You see that?

The person who controls the tongue will also control the body with all of its other impulses. Since the tongue responds more quickly and easily to sin, if it is controlled, the slower responding parts would also be controlled. See **whatever means of grace and whatever dynamics of spiritual commitment it takes to take care of your TONGUE are going to by virtue of controlling that, control the REST of you as well.**

You know what that says to me? It means that if I want to focus my Christian life on one thing – if I want to get my act together – if I want to bring my whole spiritual life under control – I ought to work on what? On my tongue.

Obviously James just said it is not possible to have a perfectly holy tongue, but to the extent that one controls his tongue, he will control his body. Isn't that practical for us? Focus on your mouth and if the Holy Spirit gets control of the most volatile and potent member, the rest will be subdued as well.

To help us understand that, James gives us two illustrations here. First a horse. How do you control a horse? You put a bit and bridle in his mouth. You control a horse by controlling his mouth. That bit lays on his tongue and when you pull to the right, he goes to the right.

And you know what, a horse is useless without that. You ever know a horse to show up and volunteer to plow a field. Mr. Ed shows up one day and says "Mr. Farmer I'd like to plow your field sir." No – not going to happen. You ever know a horse to volunteer to pull a wagon or carry a rider? No. You have to break them. And you break them with a bit their mouths and you can control the whole body by controlling their tongue.

That's what James is saying. You get control of your tongue, and you can direct your whole body. Everything else comes in line.

Another illustration in verse 4. He says ships though they are large and driven by strong winds are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go.

The issue is this – that no matter how big – power applied at the right point is efficient to control the entire vessel. And power applied to the right point – the mouth – is sufficient to control the whole person. And that's the second point – the second reason why we should be attentive to how we speak, because the tongue has incredible power to control – it has power to control you.

Speak only gracious words.

Speak only kind words.

Speak only loving words – truthful words – thoughtful words – hopeful words – holy words – sensitive words – edifying words.

Speak only gentle words, comforting words, unselfish words.

Words of blessing, of humility, of honesty, of thanksgiving.

Speak only unselfish and peaceful words and if you do that you'll control every other part of your life because the only way you can do that is to be under the control of the Spirit of God. But the focal point is on the control of your tongue.

Then he sums it up in verse 5 – he says Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.

You know why the tongue can make great boasts? Because it can do great things. It is a powerful instrument. It can tear down people. It can tear down churches. It can destroy relationships. It can wreck a marriage. It can devastate a family. It can rip up a nation. It can lead to murder. It can lead to war.

On the other hand, it can build up. It can create love and enthusiasm and encouragement and comfort and peace and joy. Powerful powerful thing is the tongue. That's why Proverbs 18:21 says "life and death are in the power of the tongue."

Whatever you do this morning, don't just blow this off. God is very concerned about the way you and I speak. Husbands – God cares about the way you speak to your wives. Wives – God is concerned about the way you communicate with your husband. Youth – or really all of us – God is concerned about your gossip at school – your slander at work – your abusive and foul language everywhere.

There is a right and a wrong way to speak and we are accountable to God for our words. But get control over this issue in your life and you will have gained control of the rest.

So James says look at your speech. Is your speech the speech of someone with authentic faith? Someone who is maturing spiritually?

See there is a vast difference between stumbling in our walk with Christ and not walking with Christ at all. There is a marked difference between the person who is genuinely seeking to follow Christ and stumbles along the way and the person who – while claiming to be a Christian – gives no real consideration for the commands of Christ.

Look back at **James chapter 1 verse 26**. If anyone considers himself to be religious and does not keep a tight reign on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.

We can't separate the way we speak from who we are. Which means if your FAITH in Christ is real, it will affect the way you SPEAK. The sheer simplicity of that truth that James is hammering home is what makes it such a powerful tool not only in proving our salvation – but in becoming who Christ intends for us to be! Will you let it transform your life this week?