

James 3:1-12 'It's All About Control!'

Last week we brought chapter 2 of James to a close by looking at v19-26 in a sermon I entitled 'Faith And Deeds Part 2: Abraham and Rahab'. V19: "You believe that there is one God. Good!" he says, as James continues to address those who claim to be Christian. And yet their only confirmation of that was a mere verbal affirmation at the most basic level, because for 1500 years the Hebrews had been taught that there is only One True God! Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." But even as many people in the unsaved world say '*Oh yeah, I believe in God.*' But James basically says, '*Good on you. "Even the demons believe that and shudder."*

Yes "the demons shudder" in the presence of Jesus, and yet humanity does not! But simply having an acknowledgement of Jesus upon our lips without the vindicating evidence of His Blood upon our lives, will do us no good, come judgement day! V20: "You foolish man." That picture of an empty ship rattling around being belted by the waves. No cargo and no steering, so it's going nowhere, like many people who are just full of hot air. Their many words are vanity, empty, meaningless. Actions, or lifestyle, must accompany faith if it's real. V21: "Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar?" Again we ran into the supposed conflict between Paul who says it's all of God's grace, and James, it's about what Abraham did.

And yet we saw that all that Abraham did was in response to what God had said! Genesis 12, in response to God's call and promises, "Abram left." Genesis 15, in response to God's promises v6: "Abram believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." And in Genesis 22, again in response to God's promises, Abraham left and was prepared to even sacrifice his own son. Yes he believed, he believed, he believed and he believed. And then acted! James 2:22: "You see his faith and his actions were working together and his faith was made complete by what he did." Yes faith comes first, and if it's real, it is followed by a God fearing life!

And also with Rahab v25: "In the same way even Rahab the prostitute was considered righteous by what she did." She knew destruction was coming from the God of the Hebrews, so she risked her life to hide Joshua's spies. Deliverance was at hand, but she must act! She rescued the spies so she and her family would in turn be saved. But only if she hung out a scarlet cord, representing Jesus' Blood, in her window. Faith is followed by a transformed life. v26: "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead."

And so we come to chapter 3, under the heading 'It's All About Control!' Beloved, James now returns to one of his main warnings: the dangers of having a loose tongue! Chapter 1:19: "My dear brothers take note of this: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." Chapter 1:26: "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless." Chapter 2:12: "Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom." So the dangers then of having that loose or unbridled tongue are a constant worry and warning throughout James' thoughts. In v1-12 of chapter 3, he gives us I guess what we might call his major work on the power of the tongue as he continues to challenge those of us who claimed to be Christian.

V1 from the original: "Become ye not many teachers my brothers, knowing that greater judgement we shall receive." Now the commentator explains that the NIV having added the word "presume," helps us to understand what the writer's intention is here. And as he now speaks of keeping the tongue in check, he addresses those who have an inner desire of being the leader, even the censurer

of others! Thomas Manton uses the word "Master" here, instead of "teacher." And since many of the early churches were indeed composed of the most lowly, even slaves and former slaves, Manton's explanation sheds even more light upon James' meaning. These people were thinking of themselves in a manner that they had no right to do so. It was a presumption on their part to believe that they had the wherewithal, (meaning the authority within the church, the biblical knowledge and the spiritual understanding) to take it upon themselves to censure, to rebuke, and instruct others. Blanchard calls this a sinful ambition. The desire perhaps to be the pin up boy preacher. Yes that "Master," over those lesser lights within the church!

Friends this is just so prevalent today. Upon his epitaph so to speak, in 2 Timothy 4:3-4, Paul warns of the kinds of men which James now speaks. "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching is want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths." Whereas James warns of the dangers of becoming one of these people. "Not many of you should presume to be teachers."

Beloved, personal ambition should never be part of the body of Christ. And why? Well when John and Andrew got their mother to ask Jesus for the front row seats in heaven, we read in Matthew 20:24- 28: "When the ten heard about this they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave, just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Jesus also said in Matthew 23:5-12: "Everything they do is done for men to see: they make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honour at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth father, for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called teacher, for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

Personal ambition has no place in the body of Christ, His church. "The greatest in His Kingdom," seeks to be the "servant of all." Even as our own Master did! "Not many of you should presume, (should be grasping after) that role of teachers my brothers." Yes to be secretly manoeuvring and grasping after that leadership role, for personal gain and ambition. Because it's foolishness on so many levels. Not the least of which James says is "because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly." And from the Greek: "knowing that greater judgement we shall receive." The writer of Hebrews puts it this way in chapter 4:12-13: "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we belong."

Greater scrutiny awaits those who are in positions of authority within God's church. And although ultimately, yes this will be when we stand before God, that scrutiny exists also in this life, and so it should. Because although we are all Christ's representatives, elders, teachers and leaders come under more stringent expectations from both God and men! Paul writes in 1 Timothy 3:1-7: "Here is a trustworthy saying: if anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled,

respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgement as the devil. To disgrace and into the devil's trap."

It is not that James is suggesting that we don't need any teachers, far from it. Never more than today have we need of sound biblical teachers. But those ambitious glory seekers who would be "Masters" over, and not servants for, others, we do not need. And we need to call them out for what and who they are. "Deceivers being deceived" Paul says, and "Of their father the devil" Jesus says.

James continues: "We all stumble in many ways." Here's the thing Brethren: we are all screw ups and failures in lots of ways, that's who we are, it's a given. But there can be great havoc that can be wrought, when careless and foolish things are said in the Name of Jesus, by self-serving people! "We all stumble in many ways, if anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check." So firstly there is that warning against ecclesiastical ambition, and now we have a warning for those who do find themselves in those roles! "We all stumble in many ways." As I've just mentioned, we can all screw up and fail Jesus. If Paul called himself 'the chief of sinners,' and him the writer of a third of the New Testament, then as I've said many times, a sober assessment of who we are and how we got here is a good thing.

The word he uses for "stumble" here: is "ptaiei" it means to trip up. Like catching your toe on the road on a cold winter's morning, especially if you have thongs on. Have you ever done that? Taking the top off your big toe? Wow it hurts. So yes we all trip up in many ways. Think about it. Were we to examine our sin totally, on a case by case basis, including thought, word and deed, simply for just one day it would be overwhelming says Blanchard. And it would do one of two things. Drive us to despair, or take us clear eyed to the Cross!

Friends I wonder if anyone of us is brave enough to do that? But yes "we all trip up in many ways." "If anyone is never at fault in what he says he is the perfect man." Since the tongue is such a powerful tool or weapon, we all need to be aware of its power, let alone those in positions who can wield such influence within the church. But he is not suggesting that anyone can actually be "perfect," (that position has already been filled) he is saying that if we can master our tongue, we will be able to keep a firm grip (as it is within our power) upon the rest of our lives! He speaks of "bits in horses mouths" v3 and the "rudders of ships" v4. And although James does go on to speak of "sparks into forest fires" v5, which of course have a negative connotation, in v3-4 that is not the case. It's all about control, about being in control. The commentator explains that the "bit for a horse" and "the rudder of a ship," of themselves are neither good nor evil, they just are. But what they are, is that through which the rider and the pilot exercise authority or control. At the hands of the one in authority or control, the horse can almost be made to dance. It's amazing to see. And a ship, can not only be made to carry cargo and people, it can even save lives.

Well so too it is with our tongues! Of themselves they are neither good nor evil. It is the one who is in authority, or control, (or the lack there of) who determines its course. Beloved being in control can be all important. I don't mean being in control of others, being controlling, but being in control of ourselves. And we don't realise how important having that control is, until we have it taken away from us. When I had my cancer, (as with many illnesses)there were aspects of my body for a while, and still to different degrees, that I lost control over, and I found it very difficult. Now there is a lady that I have known for almost 10 years through preaching, who always comes across as been completely in control, and I mean that in a good way. She is always beautifully groomed and well

spoken. We might even say, she's very prim and proper, to use an old way of speaking. And again, I mean that in an admirable way. And yet I learned just recently, that her life is and has been far from that. A very difficult childhood, and over 20 years ago she got bowel cancer. But unlike Allison and Allen, who had very good outcomes, her doctor really botched the job. And after many ensuing operations she has been left with a permanent colostomy bag for many years. And her condition is so incontrollable, that she needs to take a spare set of clothes wherever she goes. It must be tremendously humiliating for her. And my admiration of her, (which has always been very high) has just grown exponentially! Yes that loss of control for her has meant many years of misery.

And so it can be dear friends when we lose control of our tongue. It's a tremendous tool that can be used for both blessing and pain! "Bits in horses mouths," and "rudders for ships" are those steering mechanisms that are used to control things which are vastly bigger than themselves. Well again, so it is with the tongue. Because not only the mouth and the body, but the whole life of a person can be effected by what we say and what we don't say. Proverbs 15:1: "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. v2 The tongue of the wise commends knowledge but the tongue of the fool gush is folly. v4 "The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life, but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit" Yes both blessing and pain are on the tip of our tongue. And we have the power to deal out those things.

Listen to the dire warning James uses. That our mouths can in effect even take us down the road to hell! v5: "Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts." Let's remember that he began this by addressing ecclesiastical ambition. "Not many of you should presume to be teachers. We all have our giftings from God. He has given every one of us gifts, and we should all seek to use them for His glory. But again, self-seeking ambition has no place in the body of Christ! "The tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts consider what a great forest is set on fire buy a small spark."

Beloved, we are all very well acquainted with bushfires. The last one that seemed to smash the whole South East coast began way out past Braidwood, I saw it on my way home from preaching in Canberra. And then in little over a week, it seemed as though the whole world down here was burning. Yes it was out of control for many weeks. Devastation and destruction was everywhere it seemed. Homes, livelihoods, and indeed lives were lost. Well that's how it can be in the believer's life, the Lord's brother is telling us. If we let go of the reins, yes if we lose control over our mouths (even perhaps for only a moment at the wrong time) we can let loose an out of control firestorm within our life, while also wreaking havoc in the lives of others! Look again at the powerful imagery in v6-7. He explains that humanity has exhibited control and dominion over the creatures of the whole world. The skies, the seas, the land. And yet in v8: "But no man can tame the tongue." In v6 he says: "It's a world of evil." In v8: "A restless evil full of deadly poison."

So this thing that is inherent within us, which is bent toward evil, never sleeps. It's always on the hunt. No doubt referring to Job chapters one and two, where the devil comes before the Almighty and God asks him: "Where have you come from? And Satan answers, "From roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it." Which Peter also lends from. Remember he also was someone who wrestled with foot in mouth disease. Peter 5:8: "Beware your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking souls to devour." Yes our mouths can do the devil's work for him in our lives, says James. Friends, these are all powerful metaphors. He is wonderful at painting pictures to explain himself! What hypocrisy, he is now saying. v9-10a: "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse man made in his likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be."

Is this part of God's royal law, love your neighbour as yourself?" I don't think so, he might have said. Dear friends, personally I was really saddened when I again reflected on these words. That out of my own mouth both encouragement, but also tremendous hurt had come over my life as a Christian. Has that been your experience? Remember, he is writing to Christians, (well at least those who professed Christianity) not pagans. Yes "Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing" We can sing and pray and praise God on Sunday, but then given the right circumstances we can almost check our Christianity out at the hall door as we go home from worship! We can have heard messages on the dangers of an evil tongue, and then go out and get involved with gossip and hurtful words. And particularly so if we feel that we have been wronged by someone. Whereas Jesus said: "Don't repay evil for evil." And also: "Turn the other cheek." Yes be prepared to take a hit for your faith, even if it costs you. Have a compassionate, forgiving heart. Don't be ever ready to pounce. Be a clear reflection of our One True Master, The Lord Jesus Christ! And remember, this is on the back of him saying chapter 2:26: "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead." No a verbal affirmation only of Jesus, is not true faith, not true Christianity.

Again notice what he says of the tongues potential evil qualities when it's out of control. V3-4, it steers our lives astray. v5, it makes great boasts and is ferocious and unforgiving like an out of control bushfire. v6, it's "a world of evil corrupting the whole person. Setting his whole life on fire." And eventually dragging them into hell! V7-8, it's untamed and vicious. "A restless evil full of deadly poison." V9, it's deceitful and hypocritical. Praising God while cursing men. V10-12 telling them "My brothers, this should not be. Can both freshwater and saltwater flow from the same stream? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grape vine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water." No freshwater and saltwater, (or bitter water) do not flow from the same spring. And fig trees can't bear olives and grapevines can't bear figs. And when he speaks of "springs" here, he literally means holes in the ground. In the Middle East in many arid places, they still get water this way.

Friends why has James spent so much time and used such relentlessly confronting images in speaking on the dangers of the things we say? Well firstly, no doubt it was a problem within the early churches, and it must have been wreaking the kind of havoc that he is warning us about. You see if we truly are the Lord's people, yes if we truly are: "The salt of the earth and the light of the world" Matthew 3:13-14, then as our actions are a reflection, are an evidence and vindicating of our faith, so too will our words be proving of that same faith! And not boasts, not ferocious attacks, not vicious slander or poisonous gossip, not bitter, but "Living waters" will flow from within us! As the commentator reminds us from Psalm 19:13-14: "Keep your servant also from wilful sins; may they not rule over me. Then will I be blameless, innocent of great transgression. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer." Yes friends, it's all about control. Self-control!

Let's pray!