

Not Many Teachers

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[0 : 00] Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow brothers and sisters. This is a very, very surprising command, don't you think?

To find in the Bible, and perhaps even more, it's a very surprising passage, to be preaching on Pentecost Sunday, which is today, the day we Christians in all sorts of parts of the world reflect back on the wonderful gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Let me explain how bizarre it is to be reading that command today. Think for a moment who God is and what God has done. The true God is a God who speaks, and he speaks powerfully right from the beginning.

His words have been powerful. They make things come from nothing into being. And not only did God speak back at the beginning to make everything, he continues to speak.

And in these last days, he has spoken a life-giving word into this dead world. A life-giving message about his son, the great king, and a great rule, and a great message of forgiveness for rebellious people.

[1 : 15] And far from keeping that message behind locked doors, so that only a few spiritual eager pioneers can possibly find it, God has powerfully sent that message out into the world.

And at Pentecost, we remember how God poured out his own spirit into the lives of human beings to transform them and push them out into the world to live for him and speak for him.

If you skim, for example, through Luke's two volumes, the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, the connection between the work of God's Spirit and people speaking is just everywhere.

Luke chapter 1, Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied. Chapter 2, Moved by the Holy Spirit, Simeon spoke. Luke chapter 4, Jesus speaking here, The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he's anointed me to proclaim good news.

Acts chapter 2, All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak. Acts chapter 4, They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

[2 : 24] Acts chapter 6, Stephen's opponents could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke. And so on and so on. So it's totally unsurprising that we find Jesus himself encouraging his disciples to pray that the Lord of the harvest would send out laborers, speakers of his message into his harvest field.

And in plenty of places in the New Testament, the identification, equipping, and sending out of speakers of God's word is positively encouraged.

And so chapter 3 verse 1, it's just a massive surprise. Given what God is doing in the world, you would expect any statement touching on numbers of teachers to say, Well, we want as many as possible then, don't we?

But this appears to say quite the opposite. Not many. Need some explaining, doesn't it? There's another surprise here. This is the only command in this section.

Let not many of you be teachers. Notice there isn't another command in this section until verse 13. Verses 1 to 12 is a passage nearly everyone agrees about speech, about the use of the tongue, and there's no doubt how important speech is.

[4 : 00] Words have enormous power, don't they? To build up, to tear down, to help and encourage, to discourage and destroy. The whole morale of a political party, even a nation, can be changed by a speech.

With words, the bravest can be rendered powerless and ineffective. The most cowardly army roused for battle. Words are very powerful things. So powerful that most of what we do in the world, we will do with our words.

Of course, our hands are useful, and our feet are useful, and bits of our bodies are useful, but most of what we do in the world, we do by speaking. And at first sight, one might think, in this passage, all about the great influence that the tongue can have, one might think this passage is telling us the tongue is a very powerful thing.

I must work hard to control it. But notice, that is not what it says. In a book which is full of commands, in a passage all about speaking, you would expect James to say, get a grip on your speech, guys.

But at no point in this passage is there any command to control your speech. Is there? Just look. In fact, the only command in verses 1 to 12 is let's not have many teachers from you guys.

[5 : 27] Now isn't that a surprise? Why? Why? Well, because this is a passage not about the tongue, it's about the teacher. It starts with a command about not having many teachers.

And halfway through the chapter, verse 13, we get a much more positive command. Who is wise and understanding among you? Do you see the shape of the chapter is like this? Not many teachers, so what sort should we have then?

Verse 13. This is a chapter about the teacher. A passage about not having many, but, verse 13, having the right sort.

Now why is it like this, this surprising chapter? Well, it's because of the particular situation that James is writing to. We've been discovering these last few weeks that this letter seems to be written to a group of Christians behaving very badly towards one another.

It's a letter full of bad behavior, not least very hostile speech towards one another. Just turn back to chapter 1, verse 19, would you please? Chapter 1, verse 19.

[6 : 37] My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this. Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.

One of the big features of the bad behavior in this letter is that people are slow to listen and quick to speak, and in such circumstances, quick to anger. This letter is full of anger.

Chapter 3 also has that quick-to-speak feel about it. Look at verse 3. Sorry, verse 5. People who make great boasts. Verse 9. People who curse one another.

Verse 14. People who speak out of bitter envy and selfish ambition. And in a climate where words are being used in that sort of way, there are going to be people who just long to be teachers, because they like to be in the public eye, and they love the sound of their own voice, and they don't want to listen to others because they want to win in the argument.

In a world where everyone feels a need to be heard, the position of teacher is likely to be sought out by all the wrong sorts of people for all the wrong sorts of reasons.

[7 : 52] And so James' attention turns to the teacher and says, not many teachers please from you lot because of the way you're behaving.

Now next week, we'll look at the more positive part from verse 13 onwards. What sort should we have then? But in this passage, James says to this particular audience, not many of you please. And the shape of the argument here is not complicated. The shape of the argument in verses 1 to 12 goes like this. Guys, if you have your head screwed on rightly, you will not want to rush into being a teacher, will you?

That's how it goes. Let's look at the argument. Why might you not want to rush into being a teacher? Verse 1. For you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

You're a teacher? Well, you'll have to give account all the more carefully. Of course, the judgment that's in view here is God's judgment. And so often, the person who's eager to speak only has eyes on what human beings will think of them now rather than what God will think of them in the end.

[9 : 07] James wants them to raise their eyes to the end and the judgment of God. Stricter judgment goes with the territory. Of course, what you say doesn't matter much if no one's listening.

But if others are listening, if you've got a position where others listen to you, then what you say matters enormously. And James doesn't just leave it there. Look at verse 2.

It's not just stricter judgment, but stricter judgment and we all stumble, don't we? That's the way he puts it. Anyone who's never at fault in what they say is a perfect person able to keep their whole body in check.

Now, there's no doubt that controllable speech is a good thing, an important thing, but the weight of this section is to make the point that we don't speak as we ought.

We all stumble in many ways, says James. Here's a question for those who know me a little bit. How long do you need to listen to my everyday speech, especially the way I speak about other people, to know that I'm a corrupt person?

[10:14] How long does it take? How long does it take for you? Not long, I imagine. It doesn't take long for me. Look at your tongue, says James.

Look at the tongue. You want to see that we all make many mistakes? That we all stumble in many ways. Well, take a look at your tongue. I was a doctor once upon a time, and just before the era that I was trained in medicine, there used to be a vogue that when you went to the doctor, the first thing the doctor would do when he examined you was to get you to stick your tongue out.

Remember that, some of you who are a bit older? Now, they've stopped doing that, really, because it doesn't tell you all that much, but it used to be the fashion. Well, James is very like the old doctor. Do you want to know what's wrong with you, James, says James?

Well, stick tongue out. Let me see your tongue. Let me see your speech. That'll tell you. And so, in verses 3 to 12, he goes to work on the tongue. Now, the logic is slightly complicated, so we're going to work through it, and it runs basically in four steps, four steps concerning the tongue.

And what he's doing in verses 3 to 12 is showing that the tongue is a very good indicator of the heart, of the human condition. Here are the steps.

[11:31] Step 1, verses 3 and 4, the small controls the large. The small controls the large.

Verse 3, a horse is a big thing. You can make it do what you want with a very small thing. Verse 4, ships are very big things.

You can make a ship do what you want with a very small part of the ship, the rudder. The point here is that the little controls the big. The little thing is very powerful.

In the same way, the little tongue is very influential. A small part of the body, but making great boasts. That's step 1.

The small controls the large. Step 2, verse 5, the small tongue and its large effects. Verse 5, consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.

[12:34] The 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.

The image here is of burning and destruction. Like a little spark that sets a forest off, so is the tongue.

All you need to destroy thousands of acres of trees is one spark in the right place. The tongue also has great power, not just for boasting, but for destruction.

It's true, isn't it? It takes such a small remark to cause huge damage. I guess many of us know that personally. The stupid or ill-considered remark, and the second we've spoken it, we think, oh no, why did I say that?

Why did I say that? Some of us will have had weeks in life dominated by the fallout from words that took just a few seconds to speak, or a few keystrokes to type and send.

[13:48] We ought to have a license to be allowed to use words, aren't they? They're powerful and dangerous things, but actually we can all use them. It's amazing. James describes the tongue as a world of evil among the parts of the body, and I think he means this.

It's like the enemy inside, a little outpost of enemy activity in the body. Someone's described it as being like an embassy on foreign soil.

The embassy of the world in the body of the believer. We're in D-Day territory this week, today, and we remember on this occasion the great struggle to establish a position in continental Europe against an enemy.

James says, it's as though the anti-God world has established a position in your mouth with terrible effect, verse 6.

It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. James, I don't think he's saying that the body is itself made wicked by the tongue, for you can't cut your tongue out and remove the wickedness.

[15:02] Now, it's more a matter of style, I think. He often looks at the outside for evidence of the inside. And what he's saying here, I think, is that the attitudes and thoughts that are vocalized by the tongue are the things that corrupt the whole person.

Everything about a person's life and self shares the corruption manifested in our speech. And here, the language becomes graphic.

The tongue is set on fire by hell, which I think not only implies the satanic influence that exists in the realm of human speech, the devil is, after all, a liar and the father of lies, it also expresses the condemnation that belongs to us because of our speech.

Hell is, after all, not the place that Satan lives, but the place of his destruction. And James has a habit, an uncomfortable habit of looking right down the line to the end of things.

Where are things going to lead? not only do our tongues express our corruption, the destructive influence of our words in the present age is a little like a foretaste of the destructiveness of hell in the end.

[16:29] Now, folks, this is a pretty devastating analysis, isn't it? But it ends with a much more everyday conclusion. Next step, step three, verse seven, we cannot control our tongues.

All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and sea creatures. He mentions there all the categories of things that human beings have control over in Genesis chapter one.

All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by humankind. We're so good at controlling things, but no human being can control the tongue.

It's a restless evil full of deadly poison. There is one thing in the created order that we can't get near mastering.

The one thing is our speech, our tongues, which of course really means that the one thing we can't control is ourselves.

[17:35] So true to life that, isn't it? I remember while being a doctor talking to a man in outpatients. He'd come for rather vague symptoms and we got on to talking about all kinds of things in the course of quite a long conversation.

During the conversation he said this, I'm a fairly decent person I think. I think that what matters is that you don't do anyone any harm. five minutes further on in the conversation he was lamenting the fact that he had said something to his mother some time ago which had caused a massive bust up between them and then she died suddenly and it was left unresolved and he deeply regretted it. But five minutes before he'd said, I've never hurt anyone. look at our tongues says James and we'll know exactly what we're like.

So here are the steps. Step one, the small controls the large. Step two, the small tongue has large effects. Step three, and we can't control our tongues.

And step four, finally, verse nine, our tongues reveal our hearts. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father and with it we curse human beings who have been made in God's likeness.

[19:08] Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. But for the people James is writing to, it is. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?

Answer? No. My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water. What James is saying here is that the speech shows precisely the attitude towards God.

The speech about others and to others shows precisely what the attitude towards God is. Now one of James' big themes is division, the divided self. And that's where we are in these verses.

The mouth is where the person comes out in the open for all to see. And two different sorts of things come out. There are words that seem to honor God, and yet there are also words to those made in God's image which dishonor their creator.

The attitude to people demonstrates precisely the attitude to their creator. And says James, it shouldn't be, but of course it is. Do you really want to be a teacher, says James to his dysfunctional readers?

[20:34] Really? Really? Just take a look at your speech for a moment and think what your words are showing and pause.

if you're just desperate to be a teacher, you have to ask yourself whether you've really understood how things are in God's world, and how things are with human nature, and things are, how things are with human speech.

Do you really want to be a teacher? Well, our time's nearly gone. Let me pull out some implications. It's not a complicated message this, is it?

It's not complicated. Let me pull out some implications for us today. First, for Christians on Pentecost Sunday, be thankful.

This is not all the Bible has to say about speech and teachers, and we do need to rejoice at the work of the Spirit in giving life to the dead, and speech to the dumb, and a message for the world. [21 : 50] And we need to thank God for giving us faithful teachers, for faithful ones who've spoken the truth to us through our lives, not for their own gain or self-promotion, but rather as those in step with the Spirit of Christ, for the good of others and for their salvation.

salvation. And we need to thank God for the wonderful power of words that through the transforming work of the Spirit in a person's life can be used for massive good. More of this next time, but we should be thankful for the good influence of words in the world and for the great power of the Spirit to use words in the world. but for the moment, other things. Be thankful. Second, be wise. This is a letter full of absolutely horrible behavior.

And in chapter three, James zooms in on the teacher. If you want to see the root of your problem, says James, look at who's speaking and how, and especially how they're speaking about other people, those made in God's image.

[23 : 13] The reality is that when church life goes bad, as it certainly has in James, often, somewhere in there will be a voice, a strident voice that has forgotten that words are going to be judged by God in the end, and has forgotten that words about people betray a person's attitude to God, their maker.

Be wise. When you see Christians fighting with one another, look at who's talking loudest, and ask yourself, whose interest do they have at heart?

Third, be careful. We're part of a culture that absolutely loves a snappy speaker. From prime minister's questions on the one hand, all the way through to stand-up comedy on the other, we just love a person who's clever with words, and we attach enormous value to the person who speaks impressively, and we give enormous sums of money to the person who speaks impressively, and we also belong to an enormously insecure culture, desperate for approval and affirmation, and it's not a surprise then that self-promotion by words is such a feature of our contemporary world. We tweet, we blog, we text, we email, we love getting our words out there, and we can do it so easily. We troll, we love knocking down other people and their words.

It's not wholly positive then that in our Christian subculture, we prize enormously cleverness with words. Now of course, words are very powerful, and God is concerned for them, and words are God-given things and to be used for good, good.

[25 : 18] But our uber-valuation of clever speech and clever speakers may not be all good, and in such a subculture as ours, it is more than likely that people will want to be teachers for all the wrong reasons, and it's also very likely that those who ought to be teachers, the genuinely wise, will not be all that keen, and may need persuading.

More of that next week. So, be careful. Be careful who you encourage into Christian ministry positions.

Be careful who you long to be in ministry in your church. Be careful who you listen to and why. so often the reason we do want to be teachers if we do, is that we like to be listened to.

Like to have people hear what we have to say. And says James, do you want that? Really? Really? Let's pray together.

Just a moment to respond to God's word ourselves. and then I will lead us in prayer. Prayer. Prayer. [26 : 58] Prayer. Prayer. Recovery.

we thank you, Heavenly Father, for the fact that you are a speaking God, spoken the world into being, spoken us into being, and given to us the great gift of speech and words and the gift of your spirit to enliven the dead and put words in the mouth of the dumb and bring a message to the world. And we pray, Heavenly Father, with thankfulness for those who've spoken the truth to us in our own lives, in a world of lies and self-centered speech.

We thank you for speakers of truth, for people who've spoken to us not for their own benefit or comfort, but because they cared about your truth and about your people and about our own good. We thank you for such as these. We thank you for the power of words and the gift of speech. We pray for ourselves as a church, especially at a time of trial and testing, that you would help us to be careful with our words, especially our words to and concerning one another.

[28 : 34] We ask that we would speak as people who speak before you, within your earshot, and therefore that you'd help us to speak for the good of one another.

we pray for our love and for our unity. We ask that you would help us to speak the truth in love, that that would be powerfully useful in building one another up, in the building up of this church to maturity, for its establishing in truth, that you would make us together a light in the world in which we live, holding out the word of life to those around us.

All these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.