

~Other Speakers S-Z: David Servant:

As I read through James, I like to remind myself that it was the complete New Testament at the time it was written. There were no other New Testament books or letters then, so what we are reading was the spiritual diet of the early church when it was at least already 10 years old. Clearly, foremost in James' mind was the necessity of holiness, and in today's reading he elaborates on a subject introduced in chapter 1, where he wrote, "If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless" (James 1:26). This theme resurfaces often in James' letter.

Note that, according to James, Christians possess tongues that need to be restrained. That means we will be tempted to say things that we shouldn't. That is normal.

Second, if we don't restrain ourselves from saying what we should not say, it is evidence that our faith is bogus. True believers restrain themselves from wrong speaking.

This is not say, however, that true Christians never speak wrongly. No, we who bless God sometimes curse men who are made in God's image (3:9). James writes that if we don't stumble in what we speak, we are perfect, and that "we all stumble in many ways" (3:2). That makes me feel better! Keep in mind that "stumbling" is a non-intentional thing. When one stumbles, it is not something that was premeditated or planned.

I love James' vivid analogies. The tongue is like a wild animal that is seemingly impossible to tame. It is like a small fire that sets a forest in flames. As I look back at my life, my tongue was the source of every regrettable conflict. How I wish I had just kept my mouth shut! James also compares the tongue to a rudder, comparatively small to the ship, but able to set its course. So our tongue has set the course of our lives, an amazing claim for such a small part of our bodies! Our tongue is setting the future course of our lives. This is not because our words "activate spiritual laws" or "have creative power," as some teach. It is because the course of our lives is determined by our relationships with others, and our relationships are by and large determined by what we say.

For all these reasons, James admonishes us earlier in his letter to be "slow to speak" (1:19). Great advice! Two verses in the book of Proverbs come to mind:

The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things (Prov. 15:28).

When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, but he who restrains his lips is wise (Prov. 10:19).

Jesus taught that "the tree is known by its fruit" and "the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart" (Matt. 12:33). Hearts full of evil can't speak good words. Thus the first key to taming the tongue is purifying the heart. It is quite obvious from reading James' entire letter that there were false believers in the early church---those whose "faith" had no works---whom he was trying to rescue from their self-deception. They were those who were following a wisdom that was "earthly, natural, [and] demonic," and who had "bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in [their] hearts," the fruit of which was "disorder and every evil thing" (3:13-14). James was not describing true believers!

In contrast, those who are following God's wisdom demonstrate "good behavior," "deeds of gentleness," as well as purity, peace, reasonableness, mercy, steadfastness and sincerity (3:13, 17). They are true believers.

The final verse in today's reading gives us some insight into Jesus' beatitude about peacemakers. James wrote, "And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace" (3:18). That "seed" could be nothing other than the word of the gospel, because only that seed produces righteousness. Sharing the gospel is the ultimate peace-making act, because when it is received, the result is peace with God and others (see Rom. 5:1; Eph. 2:14). If the end result is peace, naturally it should be shared peacefully.